The Future Shape of Military Operations in Support of Postwar Stabilization in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Although military operations have passed the "tipping point" in Iraq, U.S. Central Command spokesmen continue to stress that their primary focus remains the completion of high-intensity operations against remaining pockets of resistance. Moreover, in contrast to previous statements that advocated allowing looting to burn itself out, recent statements suggest that the coalition will quickly reconstitute the Iraqi police force, actively preventing looting and imposing curfews on its own in the meantime. These are positive steps because accomplishing the mission -- that is, neutralizing or apprehending leadership elements, uncovering weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and facilitating the humanitarian and economic recovery of Iraq -- depends on closer engagement with the civilian population and robust policing activity. The coalition cannot afford to choose between fighting the high-intensity war or engaging in low-intensity civil affairs; both endeavors must be undertaken simultaneously, which will be a strain on both the limited numbers of coalition forces and relations with Iraqi civilians.

Securing Key Infrastructure and Individuals

Key infrastructure elements such as oilfields and dams have been secured throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom. Such efforts included the successful disruption of limited attempts to detonate southern oil wells. Yet, other lower-profile but nevertheless vital resources have not been secured as effectively. Widespread looting in major cities has greatly reduced the physical plant facilities available to Iraq's civilian ministries. In some instances, looting is causing actual infrastructure damage; for example, elements of the electrical grid in Basra have been dismantled and stolen. Generators, fuel, and medicines from hospitals are also under threat. In other cases, vital data is being lost, including regime security files in intelligence headquarters and records from Basra's central bank. These types of documentation are vital for the vetting of Iraqi officials, the pursuit of Iraqi war criminals, and the quantification of Iraqi debts.

Coalition forces have also had mixed success in securing key individuals. The coalition learned a major lesson when pro-American Iraqi Shi'i leader Abdul Majid al-Khoei was murdered shortly after arriving in Najaf. The coalition

must protect such figures, as well as interim authorities and other Iraqis who may be involved in internecine struggles or viewed as "collaborators" by regime loyalists. Even more significant, the United States has not captured as many key regime figures or military personnel as it had hoped to. The nature of the coalition's military advance and its supporting psychological operations has meant that few prisoners -- currently estimated at less than 12,000 -- will be available for interrogation. Although this has eased the strain on coalition resources, it will also reduce the amount of intelligence that the coalition can obtain on Iraqi leaders and WMD and decrease the chances of capturing leaders and regime loyalists. It should be remembered that the process of lustration -- purging loyalists from postwar political life -- was made easier in post-World War Germany because so many members of the SS and Nazi Party were captured and identified, including leadership figures hiding among the masses. Because regime figures may choose not to fight a last stand in Baghdad or Tikrit, instead dispersing within Iraq or into neighboring states, the coalition must maximize the number of prisoners it takes during the campaign. If the coalition has to root such figures out of small villages, tension will undoubtedly increase between allied forces and tribal elements.

Engaging the Population

If securing prisoners is one key element in intelligence collection, engaging civilians is another. In Basra, where the static nature of operations meant that coalition forces closely engaged the population from an early stage, results have been encouraging. Intelligence from civilians allowed the coalition to identify Ba'ath leaders and uncover arms caches. A similar pattern is emerging in central Iraq as coalition forces engage in closer contact with Iraqi citizens, resulting in the discovery of a suicide bomb factory.

Such engagement entails risks, particularly since placing troops in urban areas allows possible assailants and suicide bombers to get close to coalition forces. This is a major change from the previous level of interface between allied forces and Iraqis, who were initially warned to stay indoors and to avoid coalition units. House-to-house clearing operations along major roads were necessarily invasive; humiliating strip-searches of surrendering combatants and civilians were commonplace; and Iraqis moving in civilian vehicles continue to run a major risk of attracting coalition fire. In short, this messy fighting has likely left a major negative impression on many Iraqi citizens, requiring the coalition to create counterbalancing positive experiences as soon as possible in the postwar period.

The coalition is now taking steps to reassure Iraqis as to its intentions. Although close contact with Iraqis -- including foot patrols -- may pose extra force-protection risks, the use of such measures in Basra has helped many residents view the coalition presence as helpful rather than threatening. Moreover, so-called "quick wins" are being pursued in the "hearts and minds" field by providing time-sensitive military assistance to civilians, including desperately needed fuel supplies and medical assistance. More aloof, less manpower-intensive forms of interface may be less effective. Communications with broader Iraqi society are being established through coalition newspapers and television appearances, including regular messages from President George W. Bush. Yet, it remains to be seen how a population inured to government propaganda will receive these messages.

Invasive Policing versus "Hearts and Minds"

Clearly, invasive policing operations must be undertaken simultaneously with high-intensity fighting and the effort to win "hearts and minds." This fact poses three key challenges:

Force levels will be strained by the simultaneous, manpower-intensive requirements of displaying troop presence, enforcing curfews, preventing looting, defending key points, processing prisoners, and searching for WMD and regime leaders. Reestablishing the Iraqi police force will be problematic considering its recent history of corruption, ineffectiveness, and complicity in regime actions. In the meantime, the 4th U.S. Infantry Division is likely to be employed in a high-intensity role in Tikrit.

The need for force protection both drives and complicates a broader civil affairs and policing role for coalition forces. On one hand, engagement with Iraqis will improve intelligence on regime remainders and WMD, thereby increasing security. On the other hand, closer contact and urban visibility will expose coalition forces to further attacks and suicide bombings.

Iraqi reactions are difficult to predict. Balancing displays of authority and friendliness is a problem in these sorts of situations; it is difficult to gauge whether shows of force will engender respect or resentment among the population. In Basra, for example, British forces established their headquarters in a Ba'ath Party office. What message did this send to the citizenry? Were they reassured or concerned? Such issues will likely require different solutions in different areas (e.g., Baghdad versus Tikrit).

Conclusion

The war has been fought with explicit focus on reducing the reconstruction burden and Iraqi resentment toward the coalition. Now, the coalition must enhance its visibility via closer engagement with the Iraqi people, both to accomplish its mission and to improve the postwar force protection environment. The need to maintain order and simultaneously win "hearts and minds" is an indication that the challenges of war and peace require the same blend of forethought, calculated risk, and determined execution.

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