

Editorial

The carnage continues ... and now for Trident!

Across Iraq, excluding Kurdistan, there were, in May 2006, 1,294 civilian deaths as a result of violence. The UN Assistance Mission reports that these people included 58 women and 17 children. Further, an additional 2,687 people were wounded, including 178 women and 41 children.

‘In June 2006, 1554 civilians died violently (among them 66 women and 30 children). An additional 3,075 people were wounded ... The Medico Legal Institute (MLI) in Baghdad separately reported receiving 1,375 unidentified bodies in May, and 1,595 in June 2006. The total figure of civilians killed in Iraq adding the figures provided by the Ministry of Health and the MLI reaches 2,669 civilians in May and 3,149 in June 2006. According to the Ministry of Health, from January to June 2006 there were 6,826 civilians killed and 13,256 wounded. Including the figures of the MLI in Baghdad for the period, the total of civilians killed in Iraq from January to June 2006 was 13,338.’¹

The Iraqi Ministry of Health acknowledged, on the 15th June 2006, that at least 50,000 persons have been violently killed since 2003. The Baghdad morgue alone has dealt with 30,204 bodies from 2003 to mid-2006.

The carnage has continued, and the month of July has seen a continuation of all these trends in mortality, registering, however, a modest increase. Some of these casualties were the unintended results of indiscriminate attacks, either bombings, or random shootings. People unhappily got in the way of other people’s shoot-outs, sometimes involving the police or security forces, sometimes not. But other civilians died on purpose, in terrorist acts against targeted communities, or their Mosques or their markets.

Criminal violence also contributed to the tally. There are still executions, which have been reported not only from Baghdad, but also from Babil, Basra, Falluja, Karbala, Kirkuk, Mosel and Ramadi. Sometimes the bodies of those recovered show clear marks of torture. Sometimes buses or lorries are stopped, and those riding in them taken out and shot. In this context, the discussion about possible civil war, at some time in the future, must seem rather academic.

The slaughter in Iraq not only continues, but also continues to intensify. But the American and British forces do not appear to have any consistent strategy for diminishing this carnage in the areas over which they have asserted, by force of arms, the responsibility for law and order. Of order there is none, and of law only hollow words. True, the Americans have been compelled to dispatch additional forces, in numbers, to Baghdad. The British still focus their attention on withdrawal from suitable regions at some convenient time.

God knows the withdrawals are necessary, because there have during all this time been insane plans to maintain an expanded occupation in the Helmand province of Afghanistan. Collateral damage there has not yet begun to rival the death toll in Iraq, but the effort to prevent the return of the Taliban has already claimed over a hundred victims. The Taliban, of course, are already there.

As we go to press, the tenth British soldier has been killed in Helmand. He came from the Nottinghamshire mining village of Blidworth, and he was only 19. At the time that his embarkation was announced, the British Government claimed that he was expected to perform duties which would be calculated to win hearts and minds in Helmand, and assist in development work. It has since become abundantly plain that the then Defence Secretary John Reid's boast that he would be quite happy if the British force could complete three years service in Afghanistan without firing a shot was more Blairite deception, reached down from the same cupboard in which were kept all those mythical weapons of mass destruction.

Nato had been invited to send 9,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, raising the force total to 18,000. The requirement for these unlucky soldiers was advertised as a stabilisation and reconstruction effort. But the 3,000 British soldiers, like the rest of their Nato colleagues, found instead that they were expected to beat down a significant Taliban offensive, from which the American forces had wisely decided to disengage.

Poor relations, the British have arrived in Afghanistan in impractically small numbers, lamentably ill equipped. As the *Daily Mail* reported² early in the course of the exercise, the father of one of the first soldiers killed, an intelligence officer called Matthew Bacon, complained that his son

“had no protection at all from roadside bombs even though it was a known risk. If they had used properly armoured vehicles, British soldiers who have been killed in Iraq would have been alive today and Matthew may have been among them.”

The Snatch Land Rovers cost £50,000 while a more heavily armoured South African-made alternative considered by the MoD costs an estimated £20,000. Major Charles Heyman, editor of *Armed Forces of the United Kingdom*, said Britain is badly undermanned.

“The problem we have is that we do not have enough fighting boots on the ground in Afghanistan. Just one third of our men are infantry. At any one time, of the 1,200 frontline troops, one third are sleeping and a third are either preparing for operations or coming back from operations. That means we effectively have just 400 troops in the field to control an area the size of Wales.

There are more than 200 hardcore Taliban in the Sangin Valley and they have support through fear or favour from the population there. This is an area that has not been under Afghan Government control for years.”³

Condoleezza Rice flew into Islamabad at this time, but not to bring comfort to the British soldiers. She was anxious to persuade Pakistan and Afghanistan to ‘stop their bickering and work better together’, but she was preoccupied with the need to step up the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. The *Daily Mail* wryly reported that Ms. Rice's visit

‘comes at a time when both the Afghan and Pakistani leaders are suffering from slumps in popularity and their credibility is being questioned abroad’.

George W. Bush, of course, is hardly in a better situation.

President Karzai recently warned that it was time for the international community to rethink its strategy in Afghanistan ‘because too many Afghans, including Taliban, were being killed’.

General James Jones heads the American and Nato forces in Europe, and has reportedly been urgently seeking to persuade the Nato allies to lift the restrictions they have imposed on the tasks assigned to their troops, which make it impossible for some of them to fight, or for commanders to co-ordinate a proper military campaign.

“‘What is the point of deploying troops who don’t fight?’ ask many Afghans. That is why General Jones calls these caveats – they now number a staggering 71 – “Nato’s operational cancer”.’

Ahmed Rashid reports that ‘Nato’s weaknesses are what worry President Hamid Karzai of the Afghan Government’. But if Nato may hope that these deficiencies are not noticed in its home countries, Karzai will be well aware that they are indeed noticed by the Taliban, who will appreciate the effect on public opinion of new body bags arriving across Europe.

New suicide bombers have appeared in the Afghan lands, where, earlier, they had never been seen.

After a four year span of diminishing authority in the country beyond the capital, President Karzai seems to have decided that his survival depends upon reaching an appropriate accommodation with the real men of influence in provincial Afghanistan. In a sharp appreciation of his position, Simon Jenkins reported in *The Guardian*⁴ that Karzai, to survive

‘must deal with existing power brokers, including the drug warlords – whatever this does for his reputation abroad. Last month he appalled western observers by appointing a dozen provincial police chiefs described to me by one UN official as “gangsters and criminals”. Having failed to disarm local militias, he decided to pay them as regulars.’

Jenkins calculates that the British in Afghanistan are embarked upon mission impossible. John Reid, with his customary reticence, told Parliament that the effort to eliminate opium production was ‘absolutely interlinked to the war on terror’. Jenkins points out that the Americans have turned a blind eye to this linkage, ‘accepting that some eighty per cent of the country’s exports by value are tied up in opium’. To eliminate the poppies and the Taliban together would, says Jenkins, need a Foreign Legion of 150,000 British troops in the desert. But there are only 6,000 of them.

The Dutch and the Canadian political leaders are, we are informed, very much averse to casualties among their soldiers which appears to imply that the British should be more profligate with the lives of the forces for which they have sole responsibility.

‘Even the most starry-eyed neo-con could see little thanks in nation building in Kabul’, says Jenkins. ‘But the policy needed cover for its retreat. It needed a fall guy. Step forward plucky Britain, with Afghan glory lodged in its military genes.’

But the killing in the Middle East has reached its crescendo in the months of July and August, with the proxy war in the Lebanon. The proxy in question has been the state of Israel, which has levelled large parts of Lebanon, butchering something over one thousand of its Lebanese neighbours, in an effort, it claims, to destroy the Hezbollah resistance movement.

Like the thief who joins in the clamour of shouting ‘Stop thief!’, George Bush has accused Hezbollah of acting as proxies for Syria and Iran. Perhaps it is likely that Hezbollah has been able to arm itself with rockets and anti-tank weapons from Iran as well as Syria. But it is quite certain that Israel has been armed to the teeth by the United States, which has continued to ship planeloads of lethal weapons transiting through airports in the United Kingdom, to Israel. A horrid war has resulted, in which there have been considerably more than a thousand Lebanese civilian deaths, while the death toll in Israel has been numbered at one-tenth of that number, including the losses among combatants.

Seen as an ideological struggle, the neo-cons in the United States have described this as an effort by Hezbollah to ‘establish a universal Islamist dictatorship’.

Le Monde Diplomatique quotes Michael Ledeen, of the American Enterprise Institute.

‘It’s war, and it now runs from Gaza into Israel, through Lebanon and thence to Iraq via Syria. There are different instruments, ranging from Hamas in Gaza to Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon and on to the multifaceted insurgency in Iraq. But there is a common prime mover, and that is the Iranian mullahcracy, the revolutionary Islamic fascist state that declared war on us 27 years ago and has yet to be held accountable.’²⁵

President Bush did not take long to parrot this outburst in denunciations of Islamic fascism. How long will it be before Mr. Blair also joins this chorus?

For the time being, Hezbollah have won in Lebanon, and Israel has been checked. Evidently this has been a reverse for the Anglo-American alliance, even if it may prove a temporary one.

With mayhem all around, will the Bush war machine launch itself into Iran? To Jack Straw, this seemed ‘unthinkable’. But now surprise, surprise, Britain has a new Foreign Secretary. For all that, it still remains unthinkable that ground forces will be able to occupy Tehran. But it is, unfortunately, not at all unthinkable that air forces might visit the Iranians, even if it does appear likely that they may have no greater success than their Israeli proxies.

Surely, we live in difficult times.

* * *

Of course there is a marked shortage of sacrificial victims prepared to step forward and confront the wrath of the Jihad. Both in the United States and Britain, the recruitment campaigns of the military come up against lively and increasing difficulties. Worse, where they can, soldiers disengage. They are more and more reluctant to renew their contracts of service. The circumstance renders the

decision to renew Trident, the British nuclear ‘deterrent,’ even more ominous than it was before. Like-minded Ministers have already uttered quite precise nuclear threats. Of course, this can be comfortably assumed to be merely bluster. But blustering when you are not at war is one thing; when your military forces are grossly over-stretched, and increasingly alienated, it is quite another.

The short truth is that there is no British Government, at present or in prospect, that can be trusted with the bomb. In the words of George W. Bush, it becomes more urgent than ever to put this wicked weapon beyond the reach of these wicked men.

Ken Coates

Footnotes

1. UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, *Human Rights Report*, 1st May to 30th June 2006.
2. David Williams and Tim Shipman, *Daily Mail*, 12th July 2006.
3. *Daily Mail*, 12th July 2006.
4. *The Guardian*, June 7th 2006.
5. *National Review Online*, 13th July 2006, cited in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 2006.

Blair not welcome in Beirut

‘... Ghaleb Abu Zeynab, a member of Hezbollah’s politburo, told *The Times* (24.08.06) that the people of Lebanon did not want Mr Blair’s help. Speaking at an interview at Hezbollah headquarters in the southern suburbs of Beirut, he said: “Blair is not welcome in Lebanon. I am not speaking on behalf of Hezbollah but all the Lebanese people. They do not want someone who cried crocodile tears to visit their country. He is up to his ears in the blood of Lebanese women and children. He is not welcome here. He is a killer ...”