



Iraqi soldiers and Coalition Military Transition Team advisers clear the al-Latif neighborhood of Basra (Photo: U.S. Marine Corps)

March 2003- May 31, 2008

The Battle for Basra

By MARISA COCHRANE

Summary

Over the last year, operations by Coalition and Iraqi forces have made significant gains against al-Qaeda in Iraq and other Sunni insurgents. As the threat from these groups has decreased, Coalition Forces and the Iraqi government have focused their attention on the problem of Shi'a militias in central and southern Iraq. Nowhere was this threat more evident than in the southern city of Basra. In the wake of the premature British withdrawal from the city center and transition to an overwatch capacity in late 2007, Basra became a haven for militia and criminal activity. Rival Shi'a militias were engaged in a violent and protracted power struggle as drugs, weapons, and oil smuggling rings thrived. In late March 2008, the Iraqi government launched an offensive to reclaim the city from the militias. Iraq Report 9 offers a comprehensive look at the battle for Basra, Operation Knight's Charge.

INTRODUCTION

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's decision to take Basra back from militias in late March 2008 came as a surprise to many. Despite significant initial challenges, the Basra offensive, termed Operation Knight's Charge, significantly improved Prime Minister Maliki's political position within Iraq and his government's ability to secure the state. For the first time in its short history, Iraq's Shi'a-led government launched a major security operation against Shi'a militias (namely the Jaysh al-Mahdi militia) that have challenged central government rule in Basra, Iraq's economic capital.

Operation Knight's Charge illustrated the progress that the Iraqi Security Forces have made over the past year while also serving to underscore remaining challenges in their development. Most importantly, the Basra operation has strengthened the Iraqi central government and security forces vis-à-vis criminal militia elements and their Iranian sponsors. While lasting success is by no means assured and important challenges remain, the gains in Basra over the last few months are significant and palpable.

This Iraq Report offers a comprehensive look at the Basra offensive. The first half of the report provides a context for understanding Operation Knight's Charge, documenting the situation in Basra prior to the offensive and the rise of the militias. It also examines Maliki's motivations to go to Basra. The second half of the report documents the various stages of the spring 2008 offensive—from its shaky

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start at the end of March to the more deliberate clearing operations undertaken in April and May. This report concludes with several important considerations on the Basra offensive, including the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces, the state of the enemy, remaining challenges, and the sustainability of the security gains.

BASRA BEFORE THE OFFENSIVE: THE RISE OF THE MILITIAS

Located in Iraq's southernmost province, the city of Basra is situated along the Shatt al-Arab waterway, where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flow together into the Persian Gulf. Basra province, which shares the name of its provincial capital, contains Iraq's largest oil reserves.¹ It is the only Iraqi province with maritime access, and is therefore home to Iraq's lucrative ports, though which Iraq exports most of its oil.² Therefore, while Baghdad may be the political capital of Iraq, Basra has long been Iraq's economic capital.

The city itself spreads out along the western bank of the Shatt al-Arab, roughly thirty miles from the Persian Gulf. The Basra Palace is located along the water, in the southeastern part of the city. The city center, with its historic neighborhoods, is situated to the north and west of the palace. Highway 6 runs parallel to the Shatt al Arab through western

Basra, dividing the center of the city from the western slums of al-Hayyanayah, al-Husayn, and the outlying neighborhoods along a second highway that runs southwest from Basra towards Kuwait. At the northern edge of the city, the Qarmat Ali River flows eastward into the Shatt al-Arab. The University of Basra, Basra's smaller Maqal airport, and the Basra power plant lie along its southern bank. From the southern edge of the university, a third highway runs west towards Nasiriyah. The airport, which lies five miles west

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MAP OF BASRA PROVINCE



PHILIP SCHWARTZBERG, MERIDIAN MAPPING

of the city, has served as the single Coalition base in the area since British forces pulled out from the city center last summer.

Basra is the third-largest city in Iraq and the largest south of Baghdad.³ It has traditionally been among the most cosmopolitan cities in Iraq, with a rich history that dates to the seventh century. While the population is predominantly Shi'a, there are pockets of Sunnis and Christians.⁴ These groups have generally coexisted peacefully, earning Basra a reputation for being a tolerant

and secular city. The city is also socioeconomically diverse. Basra has a large, well-educated middle class;⁵ yet, it also has a sizeable lower class, whose members have largely come from Maysan Province and northern Basra Province. Following the draining of the marshes in the early 1990s, these migrants moved south and settled in the neighborhoods on the outskirts of Basra, such as al-Hayyanayah, al-Husayn, al-Jumhuriyah, and Khamsa Meel.⁶ These poorer neighborhoods became the main Sadrist strongholds of Basra.

During the 2003 invasion, Basra was the first Iraqi city to fall to the Coalition. British forces then took responsibility for Basra province and the three neighboring provinces to the north—Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Muthanna. Britain's hasty planning left it without a well-conceived strategy for Basra's post-conflict stabilization.⁷ Consequently, while Basra was relatively calm during the early years of the war, the state's collapse enabled Islamist parties—namely the Sadrist Trend, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and Fadhila—to expand their influence and roles in Basra.⁸ These groups were able to solidify their standing as the primary players in the political process during the January 2005 elections.⁹ At this time, the British looked upon any Iraqi tribal movements in Basra with suspicion. For example, the first British candidate to head Basra's advisory council, the top sheikh from the Bani Tamim tribe, was vehemently rejected by the other factions in the city.¹⁰ After this, the primary shareholders in the Basra political system were the Islamist political parties, all of which were backed by their militias.

By late 2004, violence in Basra was steadily increasing. In the wake of the uprising by Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi militia in Najaf and Karbala earlier that year, many of the fighters moved to Basra. The influx of Jaysh al-Mahdi militiamen fueled the increase in violence, as the fight between the Shi'a factions for control of the city's lucrative resources intensified, particularly during the period surrounding the January 2005 elections. The Sadrist Trend, ISCI, and Fadhila all vied for control of the oil infrastructure and smuggling network; the security forces; and the provision of public services and state resources.¹¹ Targeted assassinations, kidnapping, sectarian violence, gunfights, and widespread criminality accompanied this struggle, which persisted throughout 2005 and 2006.¹²

Throughout this time, militia groups intensified their attacks on the British forces in Basra. As the quantity and the quality of the attacks increased—especially with the initial employment of sophisticated and lethal explosively-formed penetrators (EFP) in mid-2005—British forces became ever more limited in their physical

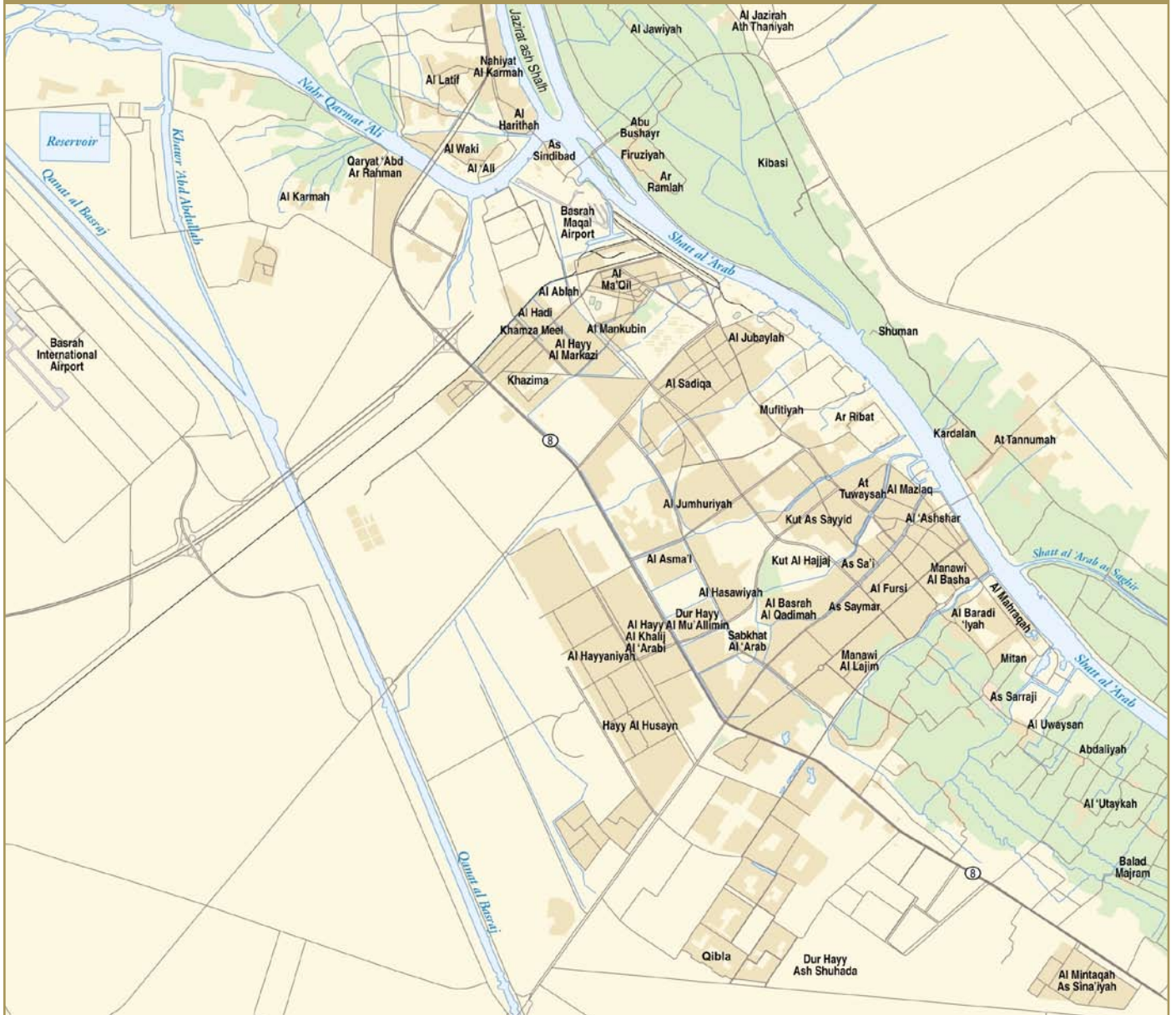
movements.¹³ “With British forces spending increasing amounts of time at their bases, militiamen also upped their mortar and rocket attacks on [their] bases, exploiting the reduction of preemptive patrols by British forces.”¹⁴ As a result, British forces became less and less able to reverse the deteriorating security situation.

Like the British, the population of Basra also found themselves subject to increasing militia intimidation and violence. The Jaysh al-Mahdi has been most active in its imposition and enforcement of strict Islamic rule in Basra, especially targeting women. Graffiti warnings sprung up throughout Basra threatening women wearing make-up or without strict Islamic dress.¹⁵ Jaysh al-Mahdi also drove moderate or secular Shiites from the public sphere.¹⁶ The militia prohibited Western and Arabic secular music, violently punishing individuals caught selling or playing it.¹⁷ The militia only permitted religious songs or ringtones, many of which praised Muqtada al-Sadr. Most citizens stayed inside their homes instead of facing the threat of militia death squads and “vice enforcers”.¹⁸

In a last effort to reclaim the city from militia control, British forces launched Operation Sinbad in late September 2006. This six-month operation originally sought to purge the highly-infiltrated police force of militia elements, yet it eventually grew into an operation to challenge militias directly, while tackling a number of reconstruction projects. By that point, however, the British forces lacked the numbers and the resources to successfully undertake the operation.¹⁹ Despite a brief decline in assassinations and criminality during the operation, by the time it ended in March 2007, violence spiked and the British troops were again subject to relentless attacks on their positions in Basra.²⁰ This essentially forced the British to withdraw to their compound at the Basra Palace and at the airport, in a move that was widely seen as a victory for the militias.²¹

The British continued their withdrawal from the Basra city center throughout the summer of 2007. In actuality, the British had been downsizing their force presence since the early years of the war. While there were 26,000 British forces in Iraq in May 2003, by July of that year,

MAP OF BASRA



PHILIP SCHWARTZBERG, MERIDIAN MAPPING

the number had dropped to roughly 9,000.²² Yet from April until September 2007, British forces steadily withdrew from their base at the Basra Palace to their main base at the Basra airport, on the outskirts of the city. This process was completed on September 3, 2007, when the British forces turned over the Basra Palace to Iraqi Army Lt. General Mohan al-Freiji, the head of the Basra Operations Command.²³

The Basra Operations Command (BOC) had been created by the Iraqi government in June

2007 to improve the Iraqi command structure.²⁴ Modeled on the Baghdad Operations Command, the BOC oversaw all Iraqi Security Force (ISF) operations in the province and coordinated with the Coalition to manage the security transition during the British withdrawal.²⁵ Lt. General Mohan al-Freiji, who was previously responsible for security in Karbala, was appointed to head the command; he worked closely with Maj. Gen. Jalil Khalaf, the chief of police in Basra, who was given the difficult task of purging the Basra police

force of militia elements. While Mohan and Jallil were seen as “the last hope for Basra” by both the British forces and the Iraqi government, they were unable to reassert government control over the city as the British drew back.

This central government was equally unable to enforce its political rule in Basra. In late July 2007, as the British withdrawal was underway, Maliki fired the Basra Governor Mohammed Waeli, who was a member of the Fadhila Party. Maliki had come under increasing pressure to dismiss Waeli, following a no-confidence vote by the Basra Provincial Council. The vote was initiated by ISCI representatives (who hold 20 of 41 seats on the Council but were able to muster a majority of votes) on grounds of corruption and oil smuggling.²⁶ Maliki ratified this dismissal on July 28, 2007; however, Governor Waeli refused to step down and referred the order to the federal Supreme Court.²⁷ Maliki was powerless to enforce the order as Waeli remained in power, demonstrating the weakness of the central government.

In the absence of a large Coalition presence, the security situation in Basra deteriorated further.²⁸ The withdrawal of the British from Basra effectively turned control of the city and its critical oil and shipping infrastructure to the Shi’a political groups and their militias. Despite the worsening security situation, British forces formally transitioned the province to Iraqi control on December 16, 2007.²⁹ Subsequently, the competition between Shi’a political factions and their militias escalated unchecked as each group tried to expand their control over government institutions and security forces. The International Crisis Group described the situation:

“Fadhila, which controls the Oil Protection Force—the unit responsible for safeguarding wells, refineries, and pipelines—essentially is in charge of the oil infrastructure. The small Hizballah party has a strong presence in the Customs Police Force. For some time now, [ISCI] has been most influential in the intelligence service. The Sadrist current dominates a large segment of the local police force, together with the Facilities

Protection Service—supposedly in charge of protecting government infrastructure—and the port authority.”³⁰

Daily violence—gunfights, assassinations, corruption, intimidation, and criminality—persisted, as did the intimidation of the local population. This presented an enormous challenge for the central Iraqi government and the Coalition, which faced the prospect of holding provincial elections by late 2008. It was under these conditions that Maliki decided to launch his offensive in Basra.

MALIKI’S DECISION TO GO TO BASRA

While the Basra offensive came as a surprise to many, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki had a strong motivation to act in Basra. Indeed, Maliki’s decision to act against the militias where he did and when he did stemmed from a series of distinct economic, security, and political considerations

With provincial elections set for late 2008, Maliki faced the dilemma of having little government control over one of Iraq’s largest and most important cities. The widespread corruption, oil smuggling, militia control of Iraq’s shipping hub all posed a serious economic threat to a government beset by debt. The security problems resulting from escalating violence and militia control also posed the practical problems for the conduct of the election. If the government security forces were unable to secure the city, they surely would not be able to secure the polling stations and prevent voter intimidation.

Additionally, the Government of Iraq needed to combat the growing threat of malign Iranian influence in Basra. Special Groups—Shi’a militia groups that receive lethal arms, training, and aid from Iran—had been operating in Basra long before the withdrawal of British forces. From as early as November 2006, Special Groups and their Jaysh al-Mahdi affiliates have received Iranian support for their attacks on British forces in Basra.³¹ What’s more, the city has been an important node on the Special Groups network,

given its proximity to Iran and the limited presence of Coalition Forces. Indeed, the top Special Groups leaders, Qais Khazali, his brother Laith Khazali, and Ali Mussa Daqduq, a member of Lebanese Hezbollah, were captured by U.S. forces in Basra in March 2007.³² While much of the Special Groups activity in Basra since the British forces withdrew from the city center has gone unreported, the enormous amount of recently-made Iranian munitions found in Basra during the spring 2008 offensive indicated that Special Groups operated widely throughout the city.

Special Groups activity was not limited to Iraq's southernmost province. Special Groups operated throughout central and southern Iraq, targeting Coalition and Iraqi Forces. In the months prior to the Basra offensive, it seemed increasingly apparent that the Iranian-backed groups were preparing for their own offensive against the Iraqi Government and Coalition Forces. Special Groups activity was on the rise in early 2008, and this uptick in violence was especially evident in Baghdad.³³ Enormous Iranian weapons caches were discovered in the rural areas outside of Baghdad.³⁴ The largest of these caches contained over 1,000 EFP components and 3,000 pounds of explosives.³⁵ Judging by the increase in Special Groups activity and the placement of large weapons caches (which typically function as rural weapons depots outside of major cities), it appeared as though the Special Groups were planning a large offensive in the capital. Hence, Maliki's decision to act in Basra likely surprised even Special Groups, whose attention was focused elsewhere.

Aside from these security and economic considerations, Maliki also sought to defeat the militias in Basra for specific political aims. Although the Sadrist Trend had been marginalized as a political force well before the Basra offensive, Maliki was still perceived as a weak and incapable leader on account of continued frictions between the leading political factions and Maliki's difficulty in mitigating them .

■ Maliki's decision to act against the militias where he did and when he did stemmed from a series of distinct economic, security, and political considerations.

Indeed, in the months prior to the Basra offensive, two major political factions indicated they would push to unseat Maliki via a vote of no confidence if he could not build an effective coalition.³⁶ Since late December 2007, both the Kurdish Alliance and ISCI warned of such a possibility “in public statements, private communications, and closed-door meetings.”³⁷ The threat of ISCI support for the measure presented the greatest danger; While Maliki had relied on the backing of the Sadrist Trend in 2006, throughout the last year he has increasingly turned to their Shi'a rival, ISCI, for support of his office and his Dawa party.

The threat of being unseated by his primary guarantor was especially worrisome, so much so that in the early months of 2008 Maliki renewed his efforts to work with the presidency council—President Jalal Talabani of the Kurdish Alliance; Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi of ISCI; and Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni from the Iraq Islamic Party. Maliki's efforts met with some success, as the Iraqi parliament passed an amnesty law, the 2008 national budget, and a provincial powers act that paved the way for provincial elections. Nevertheless, this did not assuage concerns about Maliki as a weak, ineffective leader, unable to overcome the threat of being unseated.³⁸

It was this political danger—the possible no-confidence vote—that most directly threatened Maliki. By acting against the predominantly Sadrist militias in Basra, Maliki could bolster his appearance as a strong leader, appease ISCI by weakening their main rival prior to the provincial elections, and demonstrate to the Kurdish and Sunni factions that he was actually serious about taking on the Jaysh al-Mahdi. Moreover, the decision to reassert government control over Basra—and its ports and oil infrastructure—would be imperative if provincial elections would have any chance of being secure and successful. The additional effect of weakening a major Shi'a rival by reasserting government control was an added incentive.³⁹

MALIKI'S GAMBLE: OPERATION KNIGHT'S CHARGE

Preparing the Operation

As concern over Basra increased, Coalition and Iraqi forces began developing plans to clear Basra. On March 21, 2008, Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) commander, General David Petraeus, met with Maliki's National Security Advisor, Mowaffak al-Rubaie, to discuss the details of this security plan.⁴⁰ The offensive was to resemble the Baghdad Security Plan that was launched the year before. This included a gradual build-up of forces in the southern city; the construction of combat outposts throughout the city to expand the ISF presence; and a steady squeeze on militias before large-scale clearing operations. The operation was intended to be launched several months later, during the summer.⁴¹ At the end of the meeting, Rubaie asked Gen. Petraeus to meet with Maliki, who had a different timeframe for the Basra offensive.

The next morning, Maliki told Gen. Petraeus that he had his own plan for an Iraqi-led operation that was to launch within days.⁴² Indeed, Maliki informed Gen. Petraeus that he had already instructed the equivalent of two brigades of Iraqi forces to deploy to Basra within thirty-six hours.⁴³ The Prime Minister also planned to head to the southern city to oversee the operation personally. Although Gen. Petraeus advised against any hasty action that would be inadequately planned and prepared, he agreed to support the effort.⁴⁴ Two days later, on March 24, Prime Minister Maliki arrived in Basra, along with the first of the additional Iraqi forces and a Coalition liaison team.⁴⁵

A Shaky Start

Early on the morning of Tuesday March 25, 2008, Iraqi Security Forces launched a security offensive termed *Saulat al-Fursan*, or Operation Knight's Charge, to restore stability and law to the province by purging criminal elements in the area. Shortly after the Iraqi Security Forces entered the neighborhood of Al-Tamiyah, a stronghold

of Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi militia in western Basra, violent clashes erupted.⁴⁶ Throughout the day, as Iraqi forces expanded in to other Sadrist strongholds, including the neighborhoods of al-Jumhuriyah, al-Hayyanayah, Khamsa Meel, and al-Jubaylah, they met with fierce resistance and continued to clash with militiamen.⁴⁷

Over the next few days, fighting between the government security forces and local militias persisted and spread to the neighborhoods of al-Ma'qil, al-Husayn, and al-Kharma. The newly-formed and inexperienced 14th Iraqi Army Division struggled to contain the violence during the first few days of fighting. The units faced much stronger resistance than they expected because of the large amount of Iranian weapons provided to the militias.⁴⁸ While Maliki issued and later extended an ultimatum for the militias to lay down their heavy weapons, the persistent violence indicated the gunmen had no intention of doing so.⁴⁹

In Baghdad, when the earliest reports of the fighting in Basra reached MNF-I, U.S. commanders rushed to provide the necessary combat and logistical support for the operations. On March 25, Rear Admiral Edward G. Winters, a Navy SEAL, flew to Basra to head the Coalition liaison team already in place.⁵⁰ Two days later, on March 27, he was joined by Lt. General Lloyd Austin, the commander of Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I), who was responsible for the day-to-day command of Coalition forces.⁵¹ Lt. Gen. Austin's senior deputy, Marine commander, Maj. General George Flynn, was sent to the Basra Operations Command, along with a team of U.S. planners. Coalition commanders provided air assets and intelligence support. Moreover, a company from the 82nd Airborne Division, which was stationed at Tallil Air Base in neighboring Dhi Qar province, was sent to Basra so as to augment the military adviser effort.⁵²

Iraqi reinforcements were also rushed to Basra to stabilize the city. In a briefing on March 26, only 24 hours into the operation, MNF-I spokesman Maj. General Kevin Bergner revealed that roughly 2,000 Iraqi troops had been moved to Basra to support the operations there.⁵³ This included Emergency Response Units (ERUs),

Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF), Iraqi helicopters, and conventional forces. Iraqi border enforcement teams (and embedded Coalition Border Enforcement Transition Teams) were also deployed along the Iran-Iraq border to interdict weapons flow.

The fierce fighting continued throughout the last week of March. It was evident that Iraqi forces had failed to adequately assess the enemy situation and plan accordingly. During that time, roughly 1,000 Iraqi Security Force members deserted or refused to fight; in some cases this resulted from the strains of poor planning and coordination and in others it was due to heavy militia infiltration.⁵⁴ Most of the Iraqi Army soldiers who deserted were from the newest brigade of the 14th Iraqi Army Division, which had completed its training only five weeks before.⁵⁵ Most of the Iraqi Police who deserted did so under the orders of Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi. By the end of the first week, the offensive reached a stalemate. The Iraqi Security Forces were unable to take control of the Jaysh al-Mahdi's heavily-fortified neighborhood strongholds. The intense clashes continued with neither side gaining momentum.

Still, there were some successes during the first week of operations in Basra. Two Iraqi Army battalions, along with a company of Iraqi Marines, successfully secured the ports, reclaiming them from the militias.⁵⁶ Engagement of tribal leaders and local security volunteer recruitment efforts yielded 2,500 recruits during the first week of the offensive, in an important step to replicate efforts that has contributed to security improvements elsewhere in the country.⁵⁷ Additionally, in an important logistical accomplishment, Iraqi forces began flying in their own supplies and troops on their two C-130 transport planes.⁵⁸

In a bid to curtail the fighting, Muqtada al-Sadr called for a ceasefire and ordered his militia off the streets on Sunday, March 30.

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This ceasefire agreement followed several days of negotiations between Sadr, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization, and Ali al-Adeeb, a member of the Maliki's own Dawa party.⁵⁹ In an interesting political move, Amiri and Adeeb flew to Iran, where Sadr has been living for over a year, without the knowledge of Prime Minister Maliki. Perhaps what is most significant was that the agreement was brokered in Iran by the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Qassem Suleimani.⁶⁰ Suleimani heads IRGC-QF activities in Iraq and is responsible for providing lethal aid, training, and weapons to Iraqi militias known as Special Groups. There is a great deal of overlap in membership of JAM and Special Groups. According to reports, the Iraqi lawmakers sought not only to ask Sadr to call of his militias, but also to ask the Iranian commander to stop funding and arming Shi'a militias in Iraq.⁶¹ The fact that the agreement was brokered in Iran by the head of the IRGC-QF indicated not only the important role Iran had in the conflict, but also the extent of its influence over Iraqi politics. Iran was a combatant in the fight, not a mediator.

Sadr's decision to call his militia off the streets likely stemmed from several considerations. First, it was likely a move to weaken the Prime Minister Maliki, the Iraqi government, and the Iraqi Security Forces, by creating the perception that they were unable to quell the violence through their own efforts. Maliki had gone to Basra to reassert government control over the city and enhance his own standing as a powerful leader. The first week of operations in Basra undermined these aims, however, as Sadr appeared to more proficient fighting force and more sway over the city. Yet, Sadr also presumably wanted to ensure his militia did not suffer inordinate losses, especially in its senior leadership, given that Iraqi and Coalition reinforcements were entering the fight. As was likely the case for Sadr's ceasefire in

August 2007, in the wake of the Karbala violence, Sadr wanted to keep his militia intact to fight another day. Presumably, Suleimani had this same desire.

The agreement seemed to calm the violence, and by late afternoon on March 30, the fighting was reported to have died down.⁶² While Sadr issued demands for the government to “grant a general amnesty for his followers and release all imprisoned members of the Sadrist movement who have not been convicted of crimes,” it was unclear whether Maliki would abide by the demands. As was soon clear by the shift in operations once additional forces arrived, Maliki intended to continue the offensive in Basra.

REINFORCEMENTS ARRIVE

One of the Iraqi reinforcement units was the 1st Iraqi Army Quick Reaction Force (1st IA QRF), which arrived in Basra on April 1, 2008 following a three-day journey from Anbar province.⁶³ The 1st IA QRF, formerly known as the 1st Iraqi Army Division until its name was changed in February 2008, is the most experienced Iraqi Army unit. In what was a major logistical achievement, “within three days of receiving the order to deploy, the 1st IA (QRF) moved a full division headquarters along with the brigade-sized Quick Reaction Force 1 and its three battalions with hundreds of vehicles from their bases around Habbaniyah, Ramadi, and Hawas to Shaibah Airfield on the outskirts of Basra.”⁶⁴ U.S. Marine Military Transition Teams (MiTTs), embedded with the units, also accompanied the QRF 1 to Basra.

Following the arrival of these seasoned Iraqi reinforcements and the enactment of the ceasefire, the Iraqi Security Forces shifted into more deliberate shaping operations, similar to the original plan to clear Basra put forward by the Coalition and Iraqi forces. This phase of shaping was intended to move Iraqi units into permanent positions throughout Basra, from which they could conduct full-scale clearing and counterinsurgency operations. Coalition Forces provided air support and other intelligence and

logistics assets throughout this phase.

This phase continued throughout the first half of April, during which time Iraqi units expanded their presence in the city—moving into central neighborhoods, setting up checkpoints, and cordoning-off militia strongholds so criminal elements could not flee the area. As ISF units move into Mahdi Army strongholds, like al-Hayyanayah, Coalition Forces provide air support and engage criminals.⁶⁵ Lt. Gen. Mohan led an ISF convoy in a show of force through al-Hayyanayah on April 2.⁶⁶ Remarkably, the convoy encountered almost no resistance as it rode through the main Sadrist haven in Basra, suggesting that the ceasefire was taking hold. Also during this time, Hillah Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, Iraqi National Police ERU, and ISOF units conducted targeted raids on criminals in al-Halaf and Mufitiyah areas of northern and central Basra.⁶⁷ Upon arrival, the QRF 1 moved to Qibla, a neighborhood on the southwestern edge of Basra. There it began cordoning and preparing positions in the neighborhood.

As they prepared for the next phase of clearing, Iraqi forces also conducted humanitarian operations in some areas of Basra. In an effort to tackle Basra’s economic woes, Maliki announced plans on April 3 for the creation of 25,000 jobs and plans to spend \$100 million to improve Basra city services. The next day, the 3rd Brigade of the QRF1 began distributing food and water to residents of al-Hayyanayah.⁶⁸

THE REAL CLEARING OF BASRA

On April 12, the Iraqi Security Forces launched the next phase of operations in Basra, which marked the start of larger-scale clearing operations in the city. This phase was remarkably successful, given the heavy militia resistance in the earliest stage of Operation Knight’s Charge. Iraqi Security Forces, led largely by units from the 1st Iraqi Army QRF, conducted deliberate clearing operations throughout the city, progressing from neighborhoods in southwest Basra, through al-Hayyanayah, to the Basra’s northern neighborhoods.

During these operations, the QRF1 paired with elements of the 14th Iraqi Army Division. On April 12, these units engaged in house-to-house clearing of the Qibla neighborhood, where they had been conducting preparatory operations over the last few weeks.⁶⁹ Iraqi soldiers moved systematically through the area, searching for wanted criminals, illegal weapons, improvised explosive devices, and other prohibited materials.⁷⁰ Several days into the clearing operations, the QRF 1 commander, Maj. General Tariq, met with local sheiks to discuss measures to spur economic development in Qibla.⁷¹ The security and reconstruction efforts of the QRF 1 were largely successful in reasserting government control over the area. House-to-house operations were also conducted in the Jaysh al-Mahdi stronghold of al-Husayn, also in the southwestern part of Basra.⁷²

The next phase of the operation began on April 19, with operations to reclaim the largest Sadrist stronghold of Basra, al-Hayyanayah. This marked the start of the offensive's most intensive clearing phase, which also included the conduct of clearing operations in the al-Husayn, al-Khalij al-Arabi and al-Sadiqa neighborhoods of Basra.⁷³

As Iraqi forces moved into the al-Hayyanayah neighborhood, they faced some resistance from Mahdi Army forces. On several occasions, JAM militias attacked IA checkpoints and patrols; during the ensuing firefight, Coalition air assets were called in to conduct airstrikes against the militants.⁷⁴ Elsewhere in the city, militias continued to target the government security forces. Within the first two weeks of April, one senior intelligence officer was assassinated; ⁷⁵ another intelligence officer and a senior Iraqi Army commander were also severely wounded in a separate IED attack.⁷⁶

Also during this phase, members of the Iraqi Security Forces that stood down in the early days of the fighting were dismissed from their positions. Roughly 500 police and 400 soldiers from Basra were fired for their failure to fight.⁷⁷ As was later revealed, many of these men were Sadr loyalists, who had been ordered by the cleric to lay down their weapons.⁷⁸ Despite Sadr's request for their reinstatement, they were not permitted to rejoin the ISF.⁷⁹ There were also reports at this time that Generals Mohan and Jallil were relieved from their positions in Basra and given new assignments in Baghdad.⁸⁰ While a

government spokesman said they were being recalled to Baghdad as a "reward for their successful mission against the criminals in Basra," it is more likely the case they were removed as a result of the poor start to the operation.⁸¹ Maj. Gen. Mohammad Jawad, the commander of the 14th Iraqi Army Division, replaced General Mohan as head of the Basra Operations Command; Maj. Gen. Adel Dahham was selected to head the Iraqi Police.⁸² Interestingly, Generals Mohan and Jallil were also relieved in late March when Maliki arrived in Basra and reinstated almost immediately afterwards.⁸³

From mid-April to mid-May, the QRF 1, along with its U.S. Marine MiTT advisors and elements of the 14th Iraqi Army Division, systematically moved through northwestern Basra. During this third phase of clearing, operations were conducted in al-Jumhuriyah, al-Huteen (in the Khamsa Meel neighborhood), al-Ma'qil, Khamsa Meel, al-Muthalth, Jamiat, Al-Markazi, and al-Abilah neighborhoods of northwest Basra.⁸⁴ Despite the heavy fighting during the earliest operations of Knight's Charge, clearing operations in the second half of April generally met with little resistance.⁸⁵ The offensive also turned up a great deal of Iranian munitions.⁸⁶ On April 28, Lt. General Mohan announced that in the three previous weeks, 324 wanted and suspected criminals were arrested, and "320 roadside bombs of different types and sizes, in addition to 1783 different guns, and huge quantities of ammunitions were all seized."⁸⁷

Perhaps emboldened by their successes and incensed by the extent of Iranian support for the militia groups in Basra, the Iraqi Security Forces began to accelerate their targeting of Sadrists in Basra in late April. Acting upon Maliki's orders to reclaim all government property, Iraqi troops, backed by British forces, surrounded the main Sadrist office in Basra, which occupied a former Iraqi Olympic committee building.⁸⁸ The government forces prevented them from holding Friday prayers and forced them to abandon the building the following day.⁸⁹ Days later they destroyed the Sadrist prayer ground attached to the property.⁹⁰ On April 24, they launched a campaign to remove all partisan photos or slogans from public places—a direct affront to the Sadrist Trend.⁹¹ The same day, a prominent Sadrist and his brother were detained in central Basra by the Iraqi Security Forces.⁹² One day later, on April

THE CLEARING OF BASRA



PHILIP SCHWARTZBERG, MERIDIAN MAPPING

25, a Sadrist security delegation was denied entry into Basra.⁹³ In early May, Iraqi forces also targeted other Shi'a groups with suspected malign links. On May 3, they raided the Iraqi National Gathering party headquarters in Basra. Likewise, the next day they destroyed the prayer ground of the ISCI-linked Thar Allah party after the discovery of a large weapons cache in the building.⁹⁴

By mid-May, clearing operations in Basra were largely complete. Earlier in the month, the QRF 1 moved into the al-Latif neighborhood on the

northern bank of the Qarnar Ali river, and conducted house-to-house searches for wanted criminals and illegal weapons.⁹⁵ “The clearing of al-Latif resulted in several cache discoveries, including dozens of automatic weapons, mortars and improvised explosive devices. The QRF 1 also detained several criminals, and raided and demolished the residence of a known IED maker and militia leader.”⁹⁶ As militia elements fled north from Basra, towards their remaining strongholds in the northern Basra province and southern Maysan province, Iraqi Security Forces

pursued these elements. On May 13, a new and fourth phase of the offensive began in these areas north of Basra, particularly in the city of al-Qurnah.⁹⁷ Al-Qurnah is located roughly thirty-five miles north of the city, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers join. It has long been a Sadrist stronghold and Special Groups hub for weapons distribution.⁹⁸ Not surprisingly, operations in this area have been conducted by the QRF 1 along with a brigade of the 14th IAD.⁹⁹ It is likely that upon completion of security operations in northern Basra province, the QRF 1 will continue to pursue militia extremists into Maysan province, the last major Sadrist stronghold in southern Iraq.¹⁰⁰

Most of the 14th Iraqi Army Division units have remained in Basra, along with other elite Iraqi units and the Iraqi police, to hold the previously cleared areas. Additionally, the forces in the city have continued to target remaining criminal elements, with near-daily raids.¹⁰¹ Other Iraqi units have moved into southern areas of the province that lie along Iranian weapons trafficking routes. On May 25, Iraqi Army units entered the southwestern city of al-Zubayr to conduct security and humanitarian operations.¹⁰² Al-Zubayr was an important node on the JAM/Special Groups trafficking networks from Iran. Weapons, fighters, and financial facilitators would move through al-Zubayr on their way to or from Nasiriyah. Indeed, days before Iraqi Security Forces began to clear the town, ISOF captured a criminal financier, suspected of facilitating weapons smuggling across the Iran-Iraq border.¹⁰³ On May 31, Iraqi forces also moved into the town of Abu al-Khasib, which lies along Highway 6, several miles from the Iranian border. Given this proximity, Abu al-Khasib is another important Special Groups smuggling hub. Hence, Iraqi soldiers and police, and their Coalition advisers, have begun their sweep of the area, with the aim of interdicting Iranian supply routes.¹⁰⁴

RECONSTRUCTION BEGINS

As the security operations progressed, Iraqi Security Forces and the Government of Iraq also stepped up their efforts to deliver food, water, services, and medical aid to residents.¹⁰⁵ During the month of May, more than 79,000 Halal meals, 400,000 liters of water, and 5.5

tons of medical supplies were distributed in the neediest areas of Basra.¹⁰⁶ Iraqi forces also led operations to provide medical support to the residents of the Tanumah, Qibla, and al-Hayyanayah neighborhoods.¹⁰⁷ In an effort to expand employment opportunities and speed reconstruction, roughly 3,000 local citizens were hired in mid-May to undertake clean-up efforts.¹⁰⁸ In order to maintain the security gains, the Maliki government needed to increase the size of the Iraqi Security Forces in Basra. On April 1, 2008, after a shaky first week of fighting, the Iraqi Prime Minister announced plans to recruit an additional 10,000 new soldiers and police to secure the city.¹⁰⁹ That same day, nearly 1,000 turned out for an Iraqi Army recruiting drive in Basra.¹¹⁰ As the clearing operations progressed throughout April and May, more residents became interested in joining the security forces. In late May, another Iraqi Army recruiting drive was held in the Hayyanayah neighborhood; more than 3,000 turned out to apply for the 1,000 available spots.¹¹¹

What is perhaps most significant, however, is that the need to expand the Iraqi government's security presence in Basra has offered a window of opportunity for tribal movements in Basra. Maliki began to reach out to Shiite tribes shortly after his arrival in the city. He held a series of meetings with leaders from the powerful Bani Tamim tribe, as well as the Halaf and Subihawi tribes, to discuss the incorporation of their members into the ISF.¹¹² Because the vetting process for joining the Iraqi Security Forces is lengthy, Maliki also moved to establish local security volunteer groups to employ the tribesmen until they are incorporated into the government's forces. In the Tanumah neighborhood, located across from the city center on the eastern bank of the Shatt al-Arab, a government-sanctioned volunteer security force was created to patrol the area after the Iraqi Army left to clear another neighborhood. 760 volunteers, mainly from the Kanaan tribe, now patrol the neighborhood and the area along the Iranian border. Given the success of the Sons of Iraqi security volunteer movements in central and northern Iraq, the creation of similar groups in the south is an important security step. However,



Iraqis gathered in the Hayyanayah district of Basra, Iraq to answer a recruiting call by the Iraqi army May 29. More than 3,000 Iraqi men from the area turned out for the event though the Iraqi army only had 1,000 positions available. (Photo: US Dept. of Defense)

there are some worrying signs in Basra, given that the \$260 monthly salaries for the volunteers have yet to be paid by the government.¹¹³ If this is not rectified soon, the militias may be able to attract these volunteers into their service.

The security gains during the Basra offensive have breathed new life into the city. With the militias at bay, many residents are venturing out for the first time in since the operations began. Shops and restaurants have reopened, many of them playing formerly-banned Arabic music. Basra's Corniche, the city's famous riverfront promenade, is crowded with residents, even late into the evening.¹¹⁴ Alcohol is again for sale in some shops, albeit discreetly.¹¹⁵ At Basra University, male and female students interact freely, and strict Islamic styles of dress are being replaced with more secular and even Western styles.¹¹⁶ Jaysh al-Mahdi checkpoints have been

replaced by Iraqi Army and Police checkpoints. Basra's residents are beginning to enjoy their newfound freedoms, uncertain of how long they will last.

FROM BASRA TO BAGHDAD

The offensive in Basra provoked a strong reaction by Sadrists across southern Iraq and in Baghdad. While the Iraqi Security Forces were able to contain the violence in most of the southern cities, the Sadrist uprising in Baghdad was most forceful. Supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr vehemently condemned the actions of the Iraqi Security Forces, which they perceived as a plan by the United States, Iraqi government, and rival Shi'a party ISCI to target their organization. In the days immediately following the start of

the Basra offensive, residents of Jaysh al-Mahdi strongholds in Baghdad—particularly the neighborhoods of Sadr City, Aamel, Jihad, and Abu Disheer—launched a civil disobedience campaign to protest the crackdown.¹¹⁷ As part of the campaign, schools and shops were closed, numerous Jaysh al-Mahdi checkpoints sprung up, and thousands of Iraqis took to the streets to protest.¹¹⁸

However, the civil disobedience movements soon gave way to violence. Iraqi Security Forces and gunmen, and rival Shi'a groups clashed in several Baghdad neighborhoods.¹¹⁹ Mortar and rocket rounds were launched at the heavily-fortified Green Zone and surrounding neighborhoods.¹²⁰ During the first weeks of fighting, these barrages were continual. A vast majority of these indirect fire attacks originated in Sadr City, the teeming slum of roughly three million that has been the primary Jaysh al-Mahdi stronghold in Baghdad and lacked a permanent Coalition or Iraqi force presence. In an effort to stem these attacks, Coalition and Iraqi forces encircled Sadr City, and prepared, for the first time in years, to move into the area in force. The operations in Sadr City and the political ramifications of the move will be documented at length in a forthcoming Iraq Report.

CONCLUSION

The Basra offensive marked the first time the Shi'a-led Iraqi government seriously took on the problem of Shi'a militias, namely Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi militia. Despite their shaky start, the Iraqi Security Forces, with important Coalition enablers, were able to reclaim vast swaths of Basra from militia control. Moreover, the Government of Iraq was able to reassert control of the economically vital ports and oil infrastructure and Prime Minister Maliki was able to improve his standing as a decisive and powerful leader. The residents of Basra are experiencing, for the first time years, a level of personal freedom denied by the Islamist militias. Yet, some important questions and concerns remain regarding the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces, the state

of the enemy, and the sustainability of the security gains.

In an impressive mobilization of resources, the Iraqi Security Forces were able to muster roughly 30,000 troops to participate in the Basra operations.¹²¹ Yet the early weeks of fighting exposed serious challenges and shortcomings of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Government of Iraq. The insufficient staff planning, which was primarily the result of Maliki's hasty decision to act in Basra, was operations most significant shortcoming.¹²² The failure to adequately assess and prepare the operational environment led to early setbacks, forcing the ISF and the Coalition to scramble to turn around the situation. Despite moving roughly 10,000 soldiers to Basra without assistance,¹²³ the reliance on Coalition Forces for close air support, other combat enablers, and logistical support throughout the operation demonstrated the pressing need to improve the ISF capabilities on each of these fronts. Finally, the personnel challenges evident in the desertion and dismissal of roughly 1,000 soldiers and police, suggests that the Iraqi Security Forces "are still prone to corruption, intimidation, and infiltration."¹²⁴ These shortcomings are not unique to the most recent offensive. While Coalition and Iraqi forces aim to mitigate these problems, it will likely take significant time and effort to do so. Further after-action evaluation of the Basra offensive may provide other insights as to how best address these critical challenges.

Still, the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces in the April and May phases of the offensive is notable. Iraqi soldiers and police were able to conduct complex counterinsurgency operations, with Coalition Forces functioning only in an advisory capacity. The performance of the QRF 1, which was responsible for the clearing of some of the largest enemy strongholds, was perhaps most impressive. Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, the Iraqi Security Forces operations in Basra can largely be considered a success in the security gains they have achieved thus far.

Yet, there is much still to be done in Basra. Corruption, a lack of basic public services, and high unemployment still plague the city. Many



Iraqi girls walk to school walk by an Iraqi Army Humvee in the al-Jumhuriya neighborhood of Basra (Photo: U.S. Marine Corps)

residents fear that the security gains, and the personal freedoms that accompanied them, are not permanent. Indeed, they are fragile and reversible. The operations in Basra did not fully eradicate Shi'a militias. The Jaysh al-Mahdi militia and Iranian-backed Special Groups have suffered heavy losses in Basra and their networks in the south have been disrupted; however, they are not entirely defeated. Rather, it is likely that have gone underground with the intention of evading the security crackdown, reconstituting, and resurfacing at a later point. Additionally, the Islamist political parties remain in power in Basra, and as such, they remain a threat to the historically moderate, secular order preferred by most Basrawis.

It is all the more important, therefore, to continue full-spectrum counterinsurgency operations in Basra—conducting both security

operations and political and economic reconstruction efforts. Iraqi Security Forces must continue their offensive against the Shi'a militias and Special Groups—maintaining a permanent security presence in former militia strongholds, confiscating illegal weapons, and targeting criminal remnants. Furthermore, the Iraqi government must also make good on its commitments of reconstruction aid and payments for local security volunteers. Finally, the Iraqi government should continue to engage those groups that have been excluded from the political arena, particularly the tribes, while strengthening moderate political forces. If upcoming provincial elections are to have any chance at success, the Government of Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces, and their Coalition partners must work resolutely to consolidate security gains and improve economic conditions in Basra.

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