

Helicopter downing in Basra underscores hostility to British occupation

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The downing of a British military helicopter in the Iraqi city of Basra last weekend once again demonstrated that the British occupation forces in the Shiite south of the country are just as ruthless, and just as hated, as their American counterparts.

The Lynx helicopter crashed into residential buildings in the Basra suburb of Saei last Saturday afternoon, after being hit by ground fire, possibly an anti-aircraft rocket. All five military personnel aboard were killed. Hundreds of jubilant Iraqis swarmed onto the streets, raining stones and Molotov cocktails on British soldiers who attempted to reach the area.

As described by the *New York Times*: “The crash in Basra drew crowds of young men and boys, who cheered and waved shirts in a celebratory spectacle as smoke rose from behind several houses, where the helicopter had gone down. In scenes broadcast on Al Jazeera television, men were seen lobbing stones at the crash site and at British soldiers who had rushed to it.”

British troops took hours to secure the site. Reuters reported that eventually around 600 soldiers were needed to maintain a cordon around the wreckage. Sergeant Stuart Lansdowne told the agency his troops came under a constant hail of rocks, petrol bombs, grenades and homemade bombs. “It was a constant stream of about eight hours of folks being pummelled,” he said.

British forces responded with plastic bullets and live rounds. Basra hospital authorities said at least four Iraqis, including a child, died at the scene and another 42 were wounded. While the British military attempted to blame the deaths on hostile militia, local residents were in no doubt as to who was responsible. “I cannot understand why they [British soldiers] started randomly shooting at innocent people,” Karar told the *Telegraph*.

British authorities pointed the finger at Shiite fundamentalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his militia, the Mahdi Army, in an effort to deflect attention from the obvious popular hostility to the British presence in Basra. The immediate targetting of the Mahdi Army has more to do with US efforts to marginalise Sadr in the new puppet government in Baghdad than any evidence of involvement in the attack.

Lieutenant-General Rob Fry, British deputy commander of multinational forces in Iraq, issued what amounted to an ultimatum to newly installed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to crack down on groups operating in Basra. He warned that if the government failed to curb the militias, military action might have to be used. “He [al Sadr] can’t be taken as a serious politician and have this tinpot army around him,” Fry declared.

In the UK, the embattled Blair government tried to downplay the incident, amid more calls for the prime minister to step down. Newly installed Defence Secretary Des Browne declared that “calm and control have been restored” and reassured parliament that Basra was not “rising up”. According to a recent *Telegraph* poll, 57 percent of Britons oppose the Iraq war while only 33 percent support it.

In a public relations exercise last Sunday, British soldiers were ordered to patrol Basra’s streets to demonstrate that all was peaceful. On the same day, Basra regional governor Mohammed al-Waili appeared on the steps of the British Embassy announcing that the Basra police would resume their cooperation with the British military. Just three months ago, the regional council was compelled to break off relations amid widespread anger over the release of a video showing British soldiers beating Iraqi youth.

Nothing can disguise the overwhelming opposition to the British occupation of Basra. The British military is compelled to rely on helicopter transport because its troops have come under repeated attack on the ground. An intelligence official told the *Daily Mirror*: “British troops are now in a terrible position in the city as it is clear the public mood is swinging towards wanting them to leave. Whereas troops were once able to go out and take part in reconstruction schemes and meet locals it is now extremely difficult for them to do so.”

A US embassy “Provincial Stability Assessment” leaked last month included Basra in the six of Iraq’s 18 provinces ranked as “serious”. According to the document, the “serious” rating meant having “a government that is not fully formed or cannot serve the needs of its residents; economic development that is stagnant with high unemployment, and a security situation marked by routine violence, assassinations and extremism.”

Fuelling the discontent is a deepening social disaster in Basra. The distress caused by high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people, is compounded by a lack of basic services, including electricity supplies, health care and education. Housing Department director Hamad Ghali told the media in February that more than 250,000 families, or about a third of the city’s population, were without homes.

Last month Marie Fernandez, spokeswoman for the European aid agency Saving Children from War, estimated that child mortality in Basra had increased by 30 percent as compared to before the US-led invasion. “Children are dying daily and no one is doing anything to help them,” she said. Many children under

five were dying from extreme cases of diarrhoea because the city's hospitals had no IV fluids. Doctors cited unsafe water, malnutrition, infectious diseases, maternal stress and poverty as the primary causes of infant deaths.

Allegations of Iranian support for the anti-occupation militias in Basra have surfaced once again. An article in the *Telegraph* based on British army sources claimed that the helicopter had been shot down by a Russian-made surface-to-air missile. Even though an official report will not be completed for months, the newspaper speculated that the weapon was one of "hundreds of missiles... known to have been sold to Iran and some to Syria".

Top US and British officials have repeatedly accused Iran of "interference in Iraq" and supplying resistance forces with sophisticated bombs used in roadside attacks on occupation troops. A spate of unsubstantiated claims emerged in the aftermath of a murky incident last September in which two undercover Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers were detained by Iraqi police in Basra driving a car packed with explosives and weapons. British troops backed by helicopters and armoured vehicles fought a pitched battle to free the two from a Basra jail.

The British military has never provided an adequate explanation of what the two SAS soldiers were doing. None of the accounts leaked to the press, including one to the *Sunday Times*, which claimed the SAS was involved in a "secret war" against Iranian-backed insurgents, explained why the two soldiers had explosives. One obvious explanation was that the SAS, which is notorious for its dirty undercover operations in Northern Ireland, is carrying out provocations aimed at deliberately fomenting communal tensions and creating the pretext for further repression.

It is clear that Basra has become a den of intrigue as 8,000 British soldiers attempt to suppress armed resistance and intimidate a hostile local population of more than two million. Earlier this year, the British military purged sections of the Basra police in an effort to eliminate the influence of hostile militias. It may well be that Iranian agents are operating in Basra and southern Iraq among a population that has strong historical and religious ties to Iran. At the same time, British intelligence is operating in force in Iraq, particularly in the southern areas.

An article entitled "Britain, Iran playing with Iraqi Shiite fire" on the *Asia Times* website in October pointed to the growing concerns of Shiite organisations at British activities. "These fears are not without basis, as every civilian and military agency of the British secret state has a presence in Iraq. These include the Secret Intelligence Service (better known as MI6), GCHQ (the electronic surveillance arm of the British intelligence), the Army Intelligence Corps and elements of the revamped Force Research Unit (an ultra-secret branch of British military intelligence, which gained notoriety for its abuses in Northern Ireland). Even the British domestic security service (MI5) and the Metropolitan police Special Branch maintain a presence in Iraq. Given the breadth and depth of the intelligence presence, it is not altogether surprising that the Iraqi Shiites are fast losing confidence in the British."

While this substantial intelligence apparatus is directed at suppressing Iraqi resistance groups, there is another aspect of the intrigues in Basra that is rarely commented on. The city is located a short distance from the Iranian border and there is a regular flow

of people in both directions. While British officials accuse Iran of infiltrating into southern Iraq, it is just as likely that the British operatives are crossing the border into the Iranian province of Khuzestan.

As the US and Britain have adopted a more aggressive stance over Tehran's nuclear programs, there have been a steady stream of press reports pointing to Washington's plans for military strikes against Iran. In lengthy articles in the *New Yorker* in early 2005 and again this year, veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh noted the activities of US special forces inside Iran.

Khuzestan holds a particular strategic and economic significance as the centre of the Iranian oil industry. Its largely Arab population, though predominantly Shiite, includes rebel groups opposed to Persian domination. While the US and Britain have denied Iranian allegations that US and British special forces were involved in a series of bombings last year in Khuzestan, the capture of two undercover SAS soldiers in Basra with a carload of explosives lends weight to the accusation.

As well as destabilising the regime in Tehran, such activities could also be linked to the Pentagon's broader planning for attacks on Iran. What has been described as the "Khuzestan gambit"—a rapid US strike across the border to seize and hold Iran's oil-rich region—has been discussed on *Globalsecurity.org*—a thinktank with close connections to the US defence establishment.

Whether or not there was any Iranian involvement in the downing of the helicopter, the anti-occupation sentiment revealed by the incident is a direct consequence of the activities of the British military in suppressing opposition to the illegal occupation of Iraq and in preparing for new colonial adventures in neighbouring Iran.



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