

Iraq's "stable" south descends into political chaos

James Cogan
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A power struggle between rival Shiite parties in Iraq's oil-rich southern province of Basra is escalating toward open warfare and looming as a major crisis for the US-led occupation and the British government in particular. There are still some 7,000 British troops in southern Iraq, who will inevitably be called upon to suppress any large-scale violence.

On April 28, the provincial parliament voted 27-12 to remove the governor, Mohammed al-Waili, one of the most senior figures in the mainly Basra-based Islamic Virtue Party or Al Fadhila. Constitutionally, a two-thirds majority is required to unseat a governor. Fadhila says Waili's opponents require a minimum of 28 votes, because the parliament has 41 seats. The factions seeking to remove him—a coalition known as the Basra Islamic Front—claim to have met the two-thirds requirement as two legislators have resigned from the assembly.

A standoff has ensued since. A proposal by Fadhila to accept Waili's removal provided he was replaced with another of the movement's leaders has reportedly been rejected. Following the vote, the Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported, "rival factions ... have mobilised their armed militias for what many residents expect to be a ferocious fight over control of the provincial council." *Azzaman* said the Basra Islamic Front had deployed 7,000 armed men into the city, while Fadhila supporters and loyalist police had surrounded the governor's headquarters.

"As armed groups fortify positions in major streets and amid heavily populated areas, the occupying British troops charged with security have so far shown little concern," the newspaper commented.

A great deal is at stake in the power struggle. The bulk of Iraq's southern oil fields and untapped reserves lie within Basra province, as does the country's only access to the Persian Gulf and its major ports. Basra itself is Iraq's second largest city, with a predominantly Shiite Arab population of more than two million.

Fadhila is the party of the Basra establishment and local Shiite tribes, who have longstanding involvement in Iraq's oil industry. Waili, the governor, comes from a family of wealthy oil traders. The management of the Southern Oil Company is connected with the party, as is the leadership of the powerful oil industry trade unions.

From the time of the US invasion, Fadhila worked to ensure

that the local Basra elite would be the primary beneficiaries of greater oil exports and inflows of foreign investment. It accommodated to the British occupation forces, manoeuvred to take control of the governorship and sought to fill the provincial security forces with its loyalists. The 25,000-strong "Oil Protection Force," which was assembled with British assistance and guards Basra's oil fields, refineries, pipelines and port facilities, is believed to have been largely recruited from Fadhila militiamen.

While separatism is not part of its official policy, Fadhila's upper echelon does include individuals who want to transform Basra into an autonomous region, like the northern Kurdish provinces. Under the country's US-drafted constitution, a region can exert control over all new oil production within its borders. A senior party leader, Aqeel Talib, told the *New York Times* last June: "We as Fadhila want to make our province our own region. We have two million people, an airport, a port and oil—everything we need to be a state."

Such plans, however, are anathema to Shiite parties such as the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIRI) and the movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Both are seeking to dislodge Fadhila from power.

SCIRI, which politically dominates most of southern Iraq, advocates Basra's oil be placed under the control of a super-Shiite region, including all nine predominantly Shiite southern provinces. Among Fadhila's supporters, this proposal is viewed as a grab by the Shiite political and clerical establishment based in the energy-poor cities of Najaf and Karbala to lay their hands on a greater share of Basra oil.

The Sadrists and Fadhila have a common origin in the fundamentalist movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr's uncle and father, both of whom were assassinated by Saddam Hussein's regime. Both demagogically espouse Iraqi nationalism, oppose the US-British occupation and accuse SCIRI of being too close to the Iran. On the issue of regionalism, however, the two have become bitter enemies.

The Sadrists, who control most of the Shiite districts of Baghdad, oppose any form of federalism that weakens the central government's authority over Iraq's oil. From the standpoint of the Shiite elite in Iraq's capital, the partition of the country into an autonomous Kurdish north and Shiite south

would leave the centre starved of resources.

More immediately, all the political factions in Basra—whether with the knowledge of their top leadership or not—are fighting for control of the lucrative oil smuggling rackets that operate from the city. Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a national security adviser for the Iraqi government, told the *New York Times* last June: “If you don’t understand what’s happening there, follow the dollar sign. There is a 6,000-barrel-per-day difference between the level of production for export and the level of actual export. It goes into the pockets of these warlords, militias, organised crime, [and] political parties.”

As British forces have steadily withdrawn and “handed over” more of southern Iraq to local Iraqi authorities, an increasingly bloody intra-Shiite conflict has developed. The British now have just two bases in Basra, at the airport and one of Saddam Hussein’s former presidential palaces. Fadhila, SCIRI and Sadrist militia have all been accused of assassinations and violence in what is commonly described as a mafia-style turf war.

In March, the escalating Shiite divisions led Fadhila’s 15 members in the national parliament to walk out of the United Iraqi Alliance—the Shiite coalition that won the largest bloc of seats in the December 2005 elections and dominates the Baghdad government. The Sadrist movement then walked out of the cabinet of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in April, denouncing SCIRI and Maliki’s Da’awa Party for refusing to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces. Demonstrating his growing support, Sadr called a demonstration of close to one million people on April 9 in Najaf—supposedly the stronghold of SCIRI and Da’awa.

The Sadrist movement also appears to be gaining influence in Basra, where it has agitated among the huge numbers of urban poor over their catastrophic living conditions. UN refugee agency, UNHCR, reported in June 2006 that the province has 60 percent unemployment, severe water and electricity shortages, rampant disease and malnutrition, a crisis-stricken health and education system and widespread homelessness. The Sadrists are blaming both the US-British occupation and Fadhila corruption.

Over the past two years, Waili, the Fadhila governor, has sought to retain support by adapting to the popular hatred of the British. On two occasions, he has ordered his administration to temporarily cease all cooperation with the occupation. The first followed a raid by British troops on an Iraqi police prison in September 2005 to free SAS personnel who had been detained by local police after they were discovered dressed as Arabs and in possession of explosives. The second followed the British killing of five Iraqis who had gathered to celebrate the crash of a helicopter in May 2006.

Fadhila’s efforts to appease the Basra masses have largely failed however. Waili’s government is widely viewed as a puppet of the foreign forces. An armed clash took place on March 22, when Sadrist militiamen were fired on after they

approached Fadhila’s headquarters and the governor’s personal residence to protest against the appalling state of electricity supply. Thousands of Basra residents carrying portraits of Moqtada al-Sadr demonstrated outside the governor’s office again in mid-April, demanding the resignation of Waili over the catastrophic conditions in the city. One of the protest’s main banners read: “We reject any corrupt despot who disrespects the masses.” An oil worker told Agence France Presse the governor was “a misfit”.

Armed resistance to the British military in southern Iraq is also steadily increasing. A British soldier, who recently returned from Basra, broke ranks in April and revealed the extent of the attacks on British forces in Basra. Private Paul Barton told his local *Tamworth Herald* that while his battalion had lost only one dead, 33 others had been wounded. “We were losing people and didn’t have enough to replace them.... On the last tour we were not mortared very often. This tour, it was two or three times a day,” he said.

“Toward the end of January to March, it was like a siege mentality. We were getting mortared every hour of the day. We were constantly being fired at. We basically didn’t sleep for six months.... Every patrol we went on we were either shot at or blown up by roadside bombs. It was crazy.”

Barton concluded: “Basra is lost. They are in control now. It’s a full-scale riot and the government is just trying to save face.”

By February, British troops were being attacked 90 times per day, compared with an average of 20 a year earlier. The British force in Iraq suffered 11 dead in April—the largest number of any month since the fall of Baghdad in April 2003. With anti-occupation sentiment and political tensions rising in Basra and the surrounding provinces, casualties are likely to soar further.



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