

Iraq: European think-tank documents occupation failure in Basra

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The situation in the southern city of Basra is a microcosm of how the policies of the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq have destroyed the country's institutions, shattered its national cohesion and set the stage for intractable violence. That is the conclusion of a June 25 report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG), "Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra".

Released amid the Bush administration's "surge" of close to 30,000 additional troops in Iraq, the ICG report is among the bleakest produced by any Western think-tank. According to the report, British forces occupying the south of the country have lost effective control over Basra. The city is now a battleground of rival Islamic fundamentalist groups, none of which have any loyalties to the US-backed central government in Baghdad. The 5,500 British troops still stationed in and around the city have been driven by "relentless attacks" into "increasingly secluded compounds".

The ICG warns that American surge is on the same road to failure, with profound consequences for the strategic and economic interests of the US and European powers.

The executive summary declared: "Basra's experience carries important lessons for the capital and nation as a whole. Coalition forces have already implemented a security plan there, Operation Sinbad, which was in many ways similar to Baghdad's current military surge. What U.S. commanders call 'clear, hold and build', their British counterparts earlier had dubbed 'clear, hold and civil reconstruction'. And, as in the capital, the putative goal was to pave the way for a takeover by Iraqi forces. Far from being a model to be replicated, however, Basra is an example of what to avoid. With renewed violence and instability, Basra illustrates the pitfalls of a transitional process that has led to collapse of the state apparatus and failed to build legitimate institutions...."

The ICG left little doubt as to why it considers the city to be crucial. "To neglect Basra is a mistake. The nation's second largest city, it is located in its most oil-rich region. Basra governorate is also the only region enjoying maritime access, making it the country's de facto economic capital and a significant prize for local political actors. Sandwiched between Iran and the Gulf monarchies, at the intersection of the Arab and Persian worlds, the region is strategically important."

In other words, control of Basra is vital from the standpoint of realising the real aims of the invasion of Iraq: opening up the country's oil reserves to transnational energy conglomerates and asserting US strategic and economic dominance in the Middle

East.

Basra, the report noted, was once one of the most cosmopolitan and diverse cities in the Middle East. Christians and members of other minorities lived in general harmony alongside the Muslim population. While Shiites were the majority, much of the upper and middle classes adhered to the Sunni branch of Islam. The city had "a tradition of tolerance and open-mindedness".

Dramatic changes were brought about, however, by the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the first US war against Iraq in 1991 and the UN sanctions regime for the following 12 years.

The city suffered severe damage during both wars and its population fell from 1.5 million to less than 900,000. In the final days of the Gulf War, Basra was the focus of a Shiite uprising against Hussein's regime. Thousands of people were slaughtered by the predominantly Sunni Republican Guard, leaving a legacy of sectarian tension. Throughout the 1990s, UN sanctions and Hussein's economic restrictions on the city produced a staggering decline in living standards and public services. The social crisis in Basra was aggravated by the influx of tens of thousands of Marsh Arabs who had been forced from their traditional lands by Baathist repression and the deliberate draining of the Euphrates River marshes. By 2003, the city's population had swelled to over two million, with many living in poverty-stricken slums and shantytowns.

The urban poor in Basra—as they did in Baghdad and numerous other Iraqi cities—turned in the 1990s toward the Shiite fundamentalist movement headed by Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr. Sadr combined strict Islamic morality with populist denunciations of the oppression of the Iraqi people by both the US and the Baathists. To a desperate population, the Sadrist current held out the false promise of a Shiite theocratic state bringing social order and prosperity.

Sadr was assassinated by Hussein in 1999 but his movement continued under the leadership of his son, Moqtada al-Sadr, and Mohammad al-Yaqubi, a prominent cleric who had considerable influence in Basra. The other major Shiite force in the city was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—a pro-Iranian tendency that directed its activities in Iraq from exile in Tehran.

The US and British forces who entered Iraq in 2003 did so with little comprehension of the influence these Shiite fundamentalist movements exerted. The view prevailing in Washington was that the invasion's "shock and awe" tactics would intimidate the Iraqi

population into accepting a puppet government made up of relatively unknown pro-US political exiles.

Instead, the US military was rapidly confronted with a guerilla war in Sunni areas of the country and barely restrained hostility among the majority Shiite population. The only political forces with sufficient influence to prevent a broader anti-occupation rebellion were Shiite clerics and religious parties. In a policy shift with far-reaching consequences, the Bush administration elevated Shiite fundamentalists at the expense of the predominantly Sunni and secular Baathist elite. Each of the various governments that Washington has installed in Baghdad has been dominated by Shiite factions, allied with Kurdish nationalist organisations, seeking to appropriate the power and privileges of the former ruling class.

The marginalisation of Sunnis has been the main factor in entrenching the anti-occupation insurgency and triggering the bloody sectarian conflict that is raging in Baghdad and other areas of the country.

In Basra, the British also encouraged Shiite fundamentalists to take over the post-Hussein state. Followers of Mohammad al-Yaqubi, who formed the Islamic Virtue Party or Fadhila in 2003, control most of the ministries in the provincial government and effectively control the Oil Protection Force, a paramilitary unit that is supposed to protect oil infrastructure. Supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr are believed to control Basra's port. Thousands of Sadrist and SCIRI militiamen have joined the local units of the Iraqi army and the Basra police. A smaller Shiite faction, Hizbollah, is believed to control the Basra branch of the Customs service.

The ICG report stated: "The end result has been monopoly control by a variety of armed Islamist parties over Basra politics. In the occupation's early stages, they focused attacks on former regime members such as Baathists and military officers. Over time, their target list extended to anyone potentially threatening their political or economic interests, be they Sunni or Shiite, doctors, engineers, journalists, tribal chiefs or independent traffickers. Engaged in a brutal scramble for resources and a vicious cycle of attacks and counter-attacks, militias have become by far Basra's principle source of violence. This could well foreshadow what will happen to the rest of the country once other causes of strife—mainly the fight against coalition forces and sectarian violence—recede."

The parties, the ICG noted, "fight most intensely over the three most valuable assets: oil trafficking, control over security forces and access to public services and resources. Evidence suggests that local parties are massively involved in oil trafficking..." A representative of Basra Sadrists told the ICG: "All parties, without exception, steal and smuggle oil." While smuggling and corruption have created fortunes for some, the bulk of Basra's population is enduring conditions that have only worsened since the 2003 invasion.

Disputes over control of oil have produced what can only be described as the ingredients for an intra-Shiite civil war in Basra, which could erupt at any time. The Sadrists, whose main base of support is in Baghdad, are demanding that oil revenues should accrue to the federal Iraqi government and be shared across the entire the country. SCIRI has called for control of all new oil production to be ceded to a southern Iraqi "region," consisting of

nine majority Shiite provinces and governed from its power base, the Shiite religious centre of Najaf.

Factions within Fadhila are bitterly opposed to both federalism and regionalism, advocating instead that the city model itself on the small Gulf states, establish autonomy from both Baghdad and the rest of southern Iraq and take the lion's share of revenues from the oil produced in Basra province.

In response to a spike of factional violence, the British military announced in September 2006 that it was launching Operation Sinbad to rid Basra of militias. As has happened in the areas being targeted by the US "surge," the Basra militias and armed groups simply went to ground, while at the same time stepping up guerilla attacks on British troops. A British soldier told the English press: "On the last tour we were not mortared very often. This tour, it was two or three times a day... 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..."

By April, the British had called off Operation Sinbad. Within weeks, the militias were back in the streets. The local Sadrist and SCIRI branches have since formed an alliance and launched an attempt to unseat the Fadhila provincial governor. Once Fadhila has been defeated, the ICG predicts, the Sadrists and SCIRI will turn against each other. The only thing that has prevented them from physically disposing of Fadhila thus far is the threat that British troops will be deployed in his defence.

The ICG concluded its report: "The British appear to have given up on the idea of establishing a functioning state... In any event, time is running out.... Over time, local government in the south could well resemble a small failed state; the government might collapse, a victim of the ruthless struggle between unregulated and uninhibited militias.... Basra teaches that as soon as the military surge ends and coalition forces diminish, competition between rival factions will itself surge. In other words, prolonging the same political process with the same political actors will ensure that what is left of the Iraqi state gradually is torn apart. The most likely outcome will be the country's untidy breakup into myriad fiefdoms, superficially held together by the presence of coalition forces."

The most significant aspect of the ICG's prediction for Iraq—a future of warlords, militias and civil war—is that it cannot advise a course of action that would produce a different outcome. Apart from lecturing the US and British governments on the need for the various Iraqi factions to adopt "genuine political compromises and a more inclusive system", the think-tank has nothing to say. The truth is that the longer the US occupation continues the more Iraqi people are being inflicted with ever-greater forms of barbarism.



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