

US occupation prepares Basra operation following British withdrawal

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In the wake of the formal conclusion on December 17 of day-to-day policing by British troops in the Iraqi city of Basra, there are signs that the US military and the Iraqi government are preparing a new operation to shatter Shiite fundamentalist influence in the city and its surrounds, including the oil industry and the country's only port, Umm Qasr.

The strongest faction in the city is Fadhila or the Islamic Virtue Party, which controls the Basra government, the management of most oil facilities, the Basra Oil Union and a 25,000-strong oil industry security force. The current governor of Basra is Fadhila leader Mohammed al-Waili. Fadhila is a Basra-centred break-away from the Sadrist movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which has its own power bases in the city. The Sadrist Mahdi Army militia allegedly controls the working class districts and the docks.

Pitted against them, in a ruthless struggle for political hegemony in the majority Shiite-populated southern provinces of Iraq, is the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), the main Shiite party in the pro-occupation government in Baghdad. The SIIC holds the largest number of seats in the Basra provincial council or legislature and has the loyalty of Iraqi army divisions based in the south. Since the beginning of the year, SIIC has been seeking to bring down Waili and install one of its own as head of the Basra government before new provincial elections are held in April. Whichever party controls the governorship in the lead-up to the vote, and therefore controls the electoral authority, will also control the conduct of the elections.

Over the past several weeks, a propaganda campaign has been launched in the Iraqi and international media to establish the pretext for an Iraqi army intervention into Basra and the removal of Waili. Amid the daily sectarian carnage taking place across the country, a series of reports has focused on the brutal conduct of fundamentalist militias in Basra and the refusal of the governor to act against them. At least 48 women have been murdered during the last six months by religious extremists for wearing make-up or not covering themselves with a hajib. The police, according to

residents cited in a December 16 feature in the British *Sunday Times*, are not investigating. A local businessman told *Times* reporter Marie Colvin: "Everyone knows the militias are doing this, but the police live in fear of them. We all do."

The ceremony to mark the British handover of security in Basra to Iraqi forces was accompanied by threats that if Waili did not move against the militias, the Baghdad government and the US military would. Iraqi national security advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubaie hysterically warned Waili that Baghdad was watching to see "what you are going to do with security... whether you will support the militias, whether you will fight corruption, whether you will cooperate with terrorism". US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus reinforced the statement with his own threat: "The provincial and military leadership still have work to do and we will assist as requested."

While cleansing the city of militia violence is likely to be the official justification for a US-backed intervention, the real concern of the US occupation and its main collaborators among the Shiite ruling elite is their lack of control over the oil industry and related economic infrastructure. Basra is the hub for 80 percent of the country's oil production, which generated \$31 billion in oil revenues in 2006 and provides the bulk of the Baghdad government's budget.

US analysts and the Baghdad government repeatedly criticised the British military for doing nothing to stop the local Basra factions from carrying out the wholesale looting of Iraq's oil exports. According to national security advisor Rubaie, as many as 6,000 barrels of oil produced each day in the south—more than \$200 million worth per year—is routinely stolen. Fadhila is accused of being the main beneficiary of oil racketeering.

The Baghdad-appointed Basra police chief, Major General Jalil Khalaf, spelt out other occupation accusations to the *Sunday Times*:

"The problems are like an interlocking chain. The militias control the ports, which earns them huge sums of money. That money they use to fund their own activities. Second,

the borders. There is a 280 kilometre border [with Iran]. Smugglers cross the border with guns and weapons and these go to the militias. We don't have enough guards or the sophisticated equipment you need to stop them. You could smuggle a tank across that border if you wanted." According to Khalaf, hundreds of vehicles supplied to the Basra police were stolen and sold on the black market.

On April 28, SIIC initiated a political move to gain control of Basra. With the support of Sadrist-linked legislators on the Basra provincial council, the party moved a no-confidence motion in Mohammed al-Waili. Waili refused to accept the outcome or to leave office. Fadhila simply declared that the vote of 27 for and 12 against did not add up to the necessary two-thirds majority. There are supposed to be 41 legislators in the council, but two had resigned.

In the months since, Waili's stock response to accusations of corruption and militia violence has been to blame rebel factions of the Mahdi Army. He has ignored a motion by the provincial council labelling his government illegal and dismissed demands by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that he steps down to end the standoff. In August, he bluntly told the *Washington Times* that his rivals could not remove him, "because we are stronger than they are".

The British withdrawal creates a window of opportunity for SIIC to alter the balance of forces. In all, 30,000 government troops are in the vicinity of the city and under the complete control of Petraeus and Baghdad, not British commanders. The largest and best equipped Iraqi army division in the area, the 10th Division, was one of the first recruited under the US occupation and is primarily made up of members of SIIC's pre-invasion Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia, which returned en masse from Iran in April 2003.

Waili and Fadhila, as well as the Basra Sadrists, are now being confronted with the prospect of their factional rival moving into their own power base under the cloak of the deployment of national government troops to establish security. While the combined militias of Fadhila and the Sadrists most likely outnumber the government forces, they do not have the backing of the American jet fighters, helicopter gunships and Abraham tanks.

For his part, Moqtada al-Sadr, anxious to preserve his relations with the US occupation, has already effectively disowned his Basra supporters, leaving them to their fate. It is likely that the upper echelons of Fadhila and the Sadrists in Basra are also seeking a deal that will preserve at least some of the privileges they have built up over the past four-and-a-half years. Such a deal will have a price, however. SIIC will be seeking revenge for the numerous losses and setbacks it has suffered. The Mahdi Army, for example, is blamed for the assassination of two SIIC governors in other

provinces and numerous other killings of SIIC supporters.

If the Iraqi army moves into Basra, mass detentions of the Sadrist militiamen and the general crushing of the Mahdi Army are a virtual certainty. It is also all but guaranteed that an attempt will be made to smash the Fadhila-controlled Basra Oil Union. SIIC considers the union a particularly annoying obstacle to its ambitions.

In August 2004, the oil union called a general strike in the oilfields against the SIIC-supported US occupation attack on the Sadrist uprising in the city of Najaf. The crippling of oil production contributed to the US military agreeing to a settlement with Sadr, which has allowed him to develop a political role and to challenge SIIC's influence within the Shiite population.

In June this year, the union called strikes in the oilfields against proposed oil laws favoured by SIIC. The terms of the oil legislation would advance SIIC's long-term goal of forming a southern regional government, including all nine of the majority Shiite-populated provinces of the country, with a high degree of autonomous control over oil production in its territory. Fadhila, conscious that such a change would inevitably lead to the supplanting of the Basra elite from its monopoly over the oil industry, has opposed what it denounces as "sectarian regionalism". It calls instead for a Basra-based mini-region consisting of Basra and two neighbouring oil-rich provinces. Industrial action by the oil union has been used to agitate for this perspective.

In response, the Baghdad government invoked laws introduced by Saddam Hussein to make membership of a union illegal in the oil and related industries. Troops were deployed around the major oilfields and have been waiting there since July for orders to seize the facilities. The withdrawal of British policing from Basra is shaping up as the prelude to a bloody escalation of occupation-inspired violence in the city.



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