

‘What’s Happening In Basra?’

Paul Smyth

The recent Iraqi military operation in Basra has generated much speculation in media and commentary circles, but without access to classified sources it is extremely difficult to accurately judge what has been happening in Basra and why. Even attempts to draw on Iraqi sources or anonymous quotes from within the Coalition do not eradicate confused or contradictory reporting. Hence, some commentators will claim that the targets of the Iraqi security clampdown in Basra are the criminal and Iranian sponsored ‘Special Groups’ that plague the city, while others will equally assert that it is the militia followers of Moqtada Al Sadr which are being attacked in order to weaken his power base ahead of provincial elections.

Whether the subject in view is the motive behind the operation, its timing and conduct, the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the militias, the role of Iran or the relative effect the operation is having on the standing of the various protagonists, there is no consensus of opinion which reigns supreme.

This is not to claim that the ‘truth’ cannot or has not been unearthed, but that presently, without access to classified material¹ it is impossible to confirm what that reality is or to extract it from the sea of opinions in which it swims. ‘We don’t know’ may be an unpalatable position for commentators to adopt but pending further developments in Iraq it is an honest backdrop against which reporting and remarks on events in Basra should currently take place.

In situations (like Basra today) where ‘ground truth’ or underlying motives are obscure, our interpretation of events becomes paramount. This interpretation feeds our assessment of the situation and this in turn influences our response. This explains how various parties have viewed the same episode in Iraq and drawn conflicting conclusions with comparable certainty. Thus, the operation in Basra and the reactions to it in other Shia parts of Iraq can be all things to all men: in it some find the authority, and others the impotence of the Maliki government; some see the growing prowess of the Iraqi military, others its ineptitude; some highlight the capriciousness of Shia personnel while others point to their loyalty, and whilst some see recent events as proof of Iraq’s inevitable collapse into chaos others see evidence of progress toward a successful outcome.

It is therefore unsurprising that the situation in Basra provides those who wish to criticise the British (for either their previous approach to security in south-east Iraq or their current military posture) an opportunity to do so. This opportunity is reinforced by the arrival of a US headquarters and hundreds of fighting troops in the British area of responsibility in Iraq. While this might be explained as the proper working out of the Coalition (e.g. an instance similar to when British forces accompanied their Iraqi military charges to Baghdad) the moves easily suit the argument that the British have failed in Iraq and need rescuing by the US ‘cavalry’. Once again, interpretation is key.

¹ Note that access to classified data does not guarantee a full picture of ‘ground truth’ in a complex scenario.

At this stage we can say that British and American forces are in Basra, fighting with their Iraqi ally, but we cannot yet state clearly whether the British intervention was coincident with, or because of, the US deployments.

Although the UK's position in Basra has been in full accordance with the Coalition's agreed policy of progressing from having lead responsibility for security to sharing that responsibility and from there to adopting a supporting role, in some commentary that process (with its attendant risks) is not deemed to indicate progress. That criticism is to be expected, but of more concern is whether 'Overwatch' has led to an erosion of political will to engage militarily when required. For although 'Overwatch' may see foreign forces adopt a significantly lower profile, it paradoxically requires a commensurate increase in political determination to intervene with decisive military force when called on to do so. If, as some media reports suggest, Iraqi leaders have marginalised UK forces, there is a political imperative for Whitehall to take active steps to restore the trust and confidence Iraqi leaders should have in the dependability and operational utility of British forces outside Basra.

Although those who censure the British performance in Iraq appear to stop short of accusing them of unravelling the Coalition's (i.e. US) progress of the past year and of bringing the multinational mission in Iraq to the brink of failure, any unjustified criticism of individual partners in an Alliance remains fundamentally unhelpful to the Alliance as a whole. Instead, it should be remembered that (as in 2005-2006) the premature commitment of nascent ISF units into combat is a dangerous course and has as much potential to unravel progress as a cosmetic approach to 'Overwatch'.

It is understandable that there is frustration in the US with the perceived indifference or timidity of coalition partners (both in Iraq and Afghanistan). The US has demonstrated resoundingly that it no longer deserves the 'casualty averse' reputation it gained following its performances in Somalia and Bosnia; instead its Forces and citizens have shown remarkable resilience in suffering more than 4000 military deaths and tens of thousands of other serious casualties. An immobilising aversion to risk is now an issue in many European capitals, not Washington. The boot has changed foot, but this change has been essentially American not European in nature.

With notable exceptions (e.g. the Netherlands), the level of risk European Coalition partners are willing to take in Iraq and Afghanistan today is little different from that which they accepted in Bosnia in the 1990s, but today's contrast in cross-Atlantic attitudes is perhaps more evident in the US because that is where the greatest shift in attitude has taken place, for it is in the US that current expeditionary endeavours are considered to be non-discretionary ventures – and even in some way existential in character² - while in Europe and elsewhere (e.g. Australia and Canada) there is negligible appetite to view them in that light. Consequently, other nations will commit (often substantial) numbers of troops to the ongoing interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan but with severe constraints on what those forces may do and the danger to which they may expose themselves.

While US Forces continue to endure casualties this difference in approach will create irritation and the criticism aimed at the UK over Basra is perhaps an expression of a wider annoyance that partners will not share the danger the US is prepared to shoulder. As the approach taken by the US in central and western Iraq continues to bear fruit American confidence in the path taken there will grow, with an attendant disregard for the views of other coalition partners who advocate their own approaches. Because American success has come at a huge price in blood and treasure it may not be

² When viewed as wars against an enemy whose aim is to destroy the US nation, its values and 'way of life'.

a lead others will willingly follow, and progress in Iraq may subsequently lead to increased tension over Basra and Afghanistan.

In order to temper the discontent felt in some US circles it should be remembered in making judgments that the military operations in Iraq (and Afghanistan) are not taking place in a vacuum. They must be conducted within the constraints in which nations find themselves. For example, however frustrating it may be in Washington (and elsewhere) that German troops in Afghanistan do not deploy to the combat zone in the south of the country, the political reality is that the German parliament must vote annually on Germany's participation in the Afghan mission, and if the price for the Bundeswehr's continued presence in Afghanistan is that it will not fight in the south, that is a penalty worth paying.

Yes, nations should be encouraged, cajoled or exhorted to maximise their commitment to the cause, but in reality this can only achieve what the political market will bear. The international mission in Afghanistan would be much more difficult if the Germans (and the Italians, Spanish and Scandinavians) went home; period. Similarly, the British may adopt a lighter approach in Basra than some in the US are happy with, but the British forces in Iraq do not work in a vacuum either. Often, it may be that the military means exists to adopt a particular posture or policy but a lack of political will prevents their adoption.

Undoubtedly, the recent violence in Basra has amplified concerns in Washington about the British approach in Iraq. But the continued British and US engagement there is at the behest of the Iraqi government, which is at liberty to make sovereign decisions about security within its own borders. After months' of Coalition (US) pressure on Iraqi leaders to take concrete action to improve security themselves, western criticisms that the ISF operations in Basra and Sadr City are ill-conceived and poorly executed have an air of irony. Certainly, there are sufficient clues to indicate that they could have been better planned and conducted, and they created unexpected difficulties which demanded significant Coalition reaction to maintain the initiative; but these operations must be viewed as Iraqi ventures and expectations adjusted accordingly.

The efforts of American and British embedded training teams will not turn the ISF into the US or British armies and when the Iraqis actively shoulder responsibility for security they do so as Iraqis, not as Coalition clones. Operational leadership and protracted combat will both test the readiness of 'green' Iraqi units and expose the ISF's latent weaknesses; consequently, foreign partners will doubtless have to come to the ISF's assistance – but that is the essence of 'Overwatch'. Realisation of the imperative for Iraqi primacy in Iraq is long overdue and while this may create situations like Basra that cause jitters in foreign capitals, progress in Iraq cannot be achieved without taking calculated risks such as the present Operation Knights Assault.

Undoubtedly, the British military must ponder long and hard over the various approaches it has taken since 2003 to maintain security in south-east Iraq. Some assumptions made have proved erroneous, and too much of the emphasis placed on lessons from Northern Ireland had little utility in Mesopotamia. Mistakes in recognising the nature of the problem in south-east Iraq were amplified by a persistent under-investment in the mission, and when reflecting on security failures or difficulties in the British area of responsibility the challenge is to identify whether correct policies were adopted but insufficiently resourced, or the wrong approaches were taken. This is prime territory for healthy speculation and a debate will doubtless run for years on issues such as whether the UK should have mounted its own 'surge' in Basra, while underpinning all of the military and

diplomatic investment made in the British area of responsibility is the need for a political determination that goes beyond the mere deployment of forces.

Ultimately, only time will tell whether the British performance in Iraq should be viewed as a success - however that is defined. Certainly, it should not be judged on the transient results of the ISF's first serious intervention in Basra. Precipitate commentary on the success of the ongoing ISF operation or the role of America's greatest partner sheds little light on the situation and is of more use to our adversaries than to our allies.

Despite its apparently abrupt start and stuttering progression, the ISF operation in Basra has not collapsed. Patently, it necessitated both US and UK forces to fulfil their 'Overwatch' responsibilities by executing reinforcement options, which is why transition to Iraqi control is followed by 'Overwatch' and not 'Withdrawal'; questions remain as to the coherence of the Coalition, the transparency of its planning and the manner in which partners interact, but loyal Iraqi government forces are occupying areas hitherto beyond official control, disloyal elements within the ISF have been exposed, the port of Um Qasr has reopened and the reactive pockets of violence in other parts of Iraq did not ignite wider instability. Although it remains to be seen if these positive outcomes will endure, *at this stage* it seems fair to conclude that justifiable criticism may be made of the way in which the ISF Operation Knights Assault was planned and conducted but not of its achievements.

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