

How Basra Slipped Out of Control:

Portent in the Shiite South?

By Gareth Porter | October 12, 2005

To understand just how tenuous the U.S. position in Iraq is at the moment, we have only to look at the way Basra, Iraq's second largest city, in the solidly Shiite South slipped out of the control of occupation forces last month.

The basic facts of the anti-British uprising in Basra have been well documented. On September 19 Iraqi police arrested two British military intelligence agents disguised as Arabs. The British command went to the police station where they were being detained to demand their return. Rebuffed by the police there, it took the law into its own hands, using armored vehicles to break down the wall of an Iraqi government police compound in order to free the two prisoners.

In response to the call of the Mahdi Army of radical Shiite cleric Moqtadr al-Sadr, hundreds of people gathered at the police station to protest that turned into a six-hour battle with the British troops. The crowd kicked and punched the British and threw stones, metal bars, Molotov cocktails and burning tires at their armored troop carriers, setting two of them on fire. The British say they killed four people and injured 44. An Iraqi judge who was there says nine Iraqis were killed, and 14 injured.

A crucial factor in Basra's sudden political transformation is that the local security forces and Shiite political leadership in Basra turned against the British and sided with the Mahdi Army. Through the six hours of violence, not a single Iraqi policeman came to the aid of the beleaguered British forces. Two days later, hundreds of policemen marched through downtown Basra waving pistols and AK-47s and shouting "no to occupation."

After meeting with the protestors, the 41 members of the provincial council voted unanimously to cut off all cooperation with British forces because of the "irresponsible aggression on a government facility." The council demanded an apology and full compensation for families of those killed and wounded by

the British. And it is still demanding that the two spies be turned over to Iraqi authorities.

Shiite responsiveness to al-Sadr's appeals to oppose British actions symbolizing the loss of Iraqi independence should have come as no surprise. For a year and a half, it has been clear that Moqtada al-Sadr has enjoyed widespread support among Shiites because of his anti-occupation stance. Sadr's popularity had skyrocketed in April 2004, when the Mahdi Army challenged foreign occupation troops in eight different Shiite cities, including Basra. According to an article by counterinsurgency specialists Jeffrey White and Ryan Philips in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, polling by an Iraqi research organization showed that only one percent of those surveyed had supported him in December 2003, but 68 percent supported him when his forces were fighting U.S. troops in April 2004.

The stunning transformation of Basra from a secure rear area for U.S. and British troops into a center of anti-occupation agitation reveals the utter weakness of the Shiite political base on which the United States must now rely to sustain its occupation of the country.

After the election in January, according to senior police officials in Baghdad, the police force in the city was under the control of militant Shiite Badr Organization, which is aligned with the government of Prime Minister Jafari. But the loyalty of many militiamen in Basra to the Badr Organization proved in the end to be very weak. By the time of the protests, the Mahdi Army was clearly predominant within the police force.

The strategic significance of events in Basra becomes clearer if it compared with a parallel event



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in the Vietnam War. In 1966 an anti-government and anti-U.S. Buddhist “Struggle Movement” loosely aligned with the Communist forces carried out an uprising and seized power in Hue, the ancient capital and center of Buddhist agitation. The U.S. command responded by airlifting South Vietnamese government battalions into Hue to reassert military control. In Iraq, however, there were no government units available to send into Basra to take back the city. And neither the British nor the Americans had enough troops to impose direct control on Basra by force.

Comments to the press by British officers in Basra make it clear that the command understands that the city slipped out of control because the occupation forces could not trust the very people who they thought were their loyal allies. The U.S. command, meanwhile, refuses to acknowledge publicly that it faces a powerful anti-occupation movement in the

South. Two weeks after the Basra uprising, Gen. George Casey, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, went so far as to claim that “lately” Moktadr al-Sadr had become “part of the solution” in Iraq.

If the U.S. command really believes that, it may be in for a nasty surprise. Moqtadr al-Sadr has yet not played all of his cards. He still has loyal followers all across the South and as well as in his primary political base in Baghdad’s Sadr City. What happened in Basra may be a preview of a strategy aimed at causing the collapse of the U.S. political position in one city after another.

Gareth Porter is a historian and an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus. His latest book is Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam (University of California Press, 2005).

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