Who Won the Battle for Basra?

by Nazar Janabi **(/experts/nazar-janabi)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

The recent military offensive in Basra was the first sizeable operation in which Iraqi government forces took the initiative to pursue armed groups in one of the country's most politically charged regions. Although the operation was a military success, its political aftermath will be crucial for the survival of both Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government and Muqtada al-Sadr's militia.

Background

Basra, Iraq's second largest city (population 1.7 million), is home to the country's main port and oil-export facility and its only point of access to the Persian Gulf. Shiite militias and criminal gangs have long struggled for control of the local oil smuggling business, which they use to finance their activities and increase their influence. Recently, Basra oil smugglers have become so brazen that one was willing to be interviewed by CNN, for whom he demonstrated how oil is stolen from a pipeline and shipped to Iran. In addition, some two thousand militiamen have reportedly infiltrated Basra's 16,000-member police force, according to estimates from the U.S. military, militia defectors, and civilians.

When al-Maliki came to office in 2006, he recognized that Basra posed a key challenge and appointed Gen. Mohan Hafez al-Fraiji -- a Saddam-era intelligence officer and defense attache -- to serve as the area's de facto "military governor." The goal was to consolidate the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Basra under a united leadership reporting directly to the prime minister. Although al-Fraiji undertook the consolidation as ordered, he submitted false reports of progress in the city. As a result, when the British transferred security to the ISF in December 2007, it was clear that the Iraqi government would eventually have to take action to regain control over the city.

The Offensive

Leading up to the operation, al-Maliki amassed six army brigades in and around Basra, along with additional regular troops and an elite unit trained by U.S. Special Forces in Baghdad. The offensive began on March 24, with al-Maliki traveling to the area to take over command from General al-Fraiji. The prime minister was accompanied by a large and high-profile team: Defense Minister Abdulqader al-Obaidi (who served as Iraqi ground forces commander until May 2006), Interior Minister Jawad al-Boulany, Minister of State for National Security Shirwan al-Waely, a group of al-Maliki's close security advisors (mainly ex-generals), and a combined total of about 30,000 ISF (army and police).

The announced goals were to reassert government control over the oil facilities and port and to crack down on militias, gangs, and outlaws. Some critics assumed that al-Maliki was drawn into the operation as part of a political deal with the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the dominant Shiite party in his parliamentary coalition. ISCI was concerned that the recent provincial elections legislation might increase al-Sadr's influence in the south, so Vice President Adel Abd al-Mahdi -- the party's seniormost official in the government -- vetoed it. That veto was withdrawn a few days before the Basra offensive, contributing to speculation that it was part of a power play by al-Maliki's own Dawa Party and ISCI against the Sadrists.

Accordingly, the Sadrists, especially their Mahdi Army militia, believed that they were the primary targets of the operation. However, the ISF also targeted members of the rival Thaar Allah organization (which runs its own militias in the southern provinces), as well as the brother of Basra's governor, who is tied to the Fadhila Party -- another major rival Shiite faction in the area. Even some ISCI members were detained.

Although the local police experienced a high rate of desertion during the operation, the Iraqi army, as expected, performed considerably better. Even so, the 52nd Brigade of the newly formed 14th Division -- consisting mainly of Basra locals -- disintegrated during the fighting, illustrating the point that local forces are often not well suited for counterinsurgency operations, especially in closely knit communities like those in Iraq.

The Iraqi air force played a remarkable role in providing logistical and targeting support, using helicopters and two C-130s to transport more than 175 tons of cargo and 800 soldiers. Close air support, however, was provided by the coalition. Because the Iraqi air force has not yet developed that capability, the army will continue to depend on the coalition to provide such support for the foreseeable future.

The operation also sparked wider violence that spread to other southern provinces and to Baghdad, providing opportunities for Sadrist "special groups" to operate freely. Their efforts were bolstered by al-Sadr's decree on the second day of battle to continue fighting ISF and coalition forces. These special groups -- which are better trained and equipped than Mahdi Army regulars -- are in fact sponsored and controlled by Iran's Qods (Jerusalem) Force, a part of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. They are responsible for most of the ISF and coalition casualties during the weeklong fighting, firing mortar and 107-millimeter Iranian rocket rounds against the Green Zone as well as small/medium arms and rocket-propelled grenades against ISF units throughout southern Iraq.

In parallel with the operation, al-Maliki and ISCI sent a delegation to meet with Muqtada al-Sadr in Iran. Hadi al-Amiri, leader of ISCI's Badr Organization, and Ali al-Adib, a Dawa leader, were tasked with convincing al-Sadr to call off his militia. They arrived in Iran on the same day that Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the key Shiite cleric in Najaf, announced after a meeting with al-Sadr representatives that he would not interfere, and that "arms should be in the hands of the government only." Recognizing that this presented a no-win situation for him, al-Sadr announced late on March 30 that Mahdi Army members should "put aside their arms," and that anyone carrying arms thereafter was not a member. This gave al-Maliki license to target those still bearing arms, subsequently forcing the "special groups" to cease their activities or risk exposure.

Net Results

The Iraqi government's operation, however hastily and poorly planned, is nevertheless a net gain. It forced the Mahdi Army and other previously "untouchable" elements -- prominent warlords, gang leaders, and key militia members -- to back down. For instance, the notorious leader of the Thaar Allah organization was arrested with three of his brothers on charges ranging from murder to weapons trafficking and oil smuggling.

Another byproduct of the operation was increased tribal engagement by the government in and around Basra -- more than 10,000 local tribesmen have been recruited by the ISF so far. And when al-Maliki returned to Baghdad, he immediately sent deputy ministers to begin working on reconstruction projects in Basra province. Equally

important, the operation was supported by Iraq's four main Shiite ayatollahs, including al-Sistani. Al-Sadr had been relying on al-Sistani to bail him out, as occurred during past showdowns with Baghdad.

Looking Ahead

The Basra operation provides a clear picture of the ISF's evolving capabilities with only partial coalition support. Government forces achieved a notable tactical success, but the operation also revealed gaps in their capabilities and a lack of consistency in the performance of various units. These need to be addressed urgently if the Iraqi government is serious about taking responsibility for the country's security. Overall, however, the security forces have been successfully tested; although there were glitches, nothing serious went wrong.

The operation's political aftermath is yet to be seen, but early indicators suggest that it strengthened al-Maliki. If so, it will likely give him the confidence needed to gradually broaden his base of support beyond his own party and sect.

Nazar Janabi is The Washington Institute's Next Generation fellow, focusing on Iraqi and Middle Eastern security issues and democratization in the region. ❖

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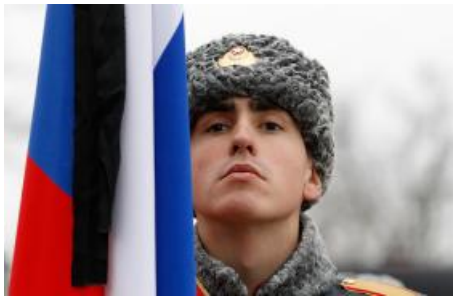

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