

So Bad, and Still Worse to Come

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Articles & Testimony

It was never meant to be like this. When the British military started planning for the invasion of Iraq, the southern provinces around the port city of Basra were expected to be a softer option than the central provinces the Americans were asked to deal with.

Although Basra proved an unexpectedly tough nut to crack -- it took two weeks to fall -- the occupation role was expected to be easy. Iraq's south is populated by Shia Muslims, victimised by Saddam Hussein, and therefore expected to be grateful for liberation.

Instead the British military finds itself overstretched.

Defence Secretary John Reid remains resolutely bullish. But mutterings from senior officers suggest there is concern over strategy and morale. And from the ranks, the most public voices are clearly unhappy and critical of British policy.

Although some troop reductions are planned, they are essentially cosmetic. The British contingent in Afghanistan is being boosted: one hot, dusty and dangerous place is being swapped for another.

The honeymoon period in Iraq was brief. Saddam's principal legacy was virtually zero civil society. The average Iraqi's default mode was surly ingratitude -- when I travelled two years ago from the badlands around Baghdad, Basra was no welcome oasis. My group's Kurdish bodyguards took over the floor of the small hotel, staying awake all night, pointing their AK47s down the stairwell.

With the latest deaths, British casualties are now running proportionately equal to, or at an even greater rate than, the US death toll.

Ironically, while the Americans in Baghdad are making political progress, engaging the Sunnis and reportedly splitting them from the al-Qaeda jihadists, the situation in the British zone appears to be heading in the other direction.

Relations with Basra governor Mohammed Wali are poor and becoming worse, as British forces belatedly try to deal with rogue elements of local Iraqi security forces. "Rogue" is used broadly: there is corruption, criminality and sabotage.

The presence of Iran, on the other side of the palm groves, looms large.

British soldiers shot by snipers or blown up by roadside bombs are not being killed by Sunni insurgents or jihadists. Rather, they are up against militants armed and backed by Iran.

The prospects are poor but not yet hopeless. Tony Blair himself will probably not cut and run. But his replacement might take a different view of the relationship with George Bush's administration.

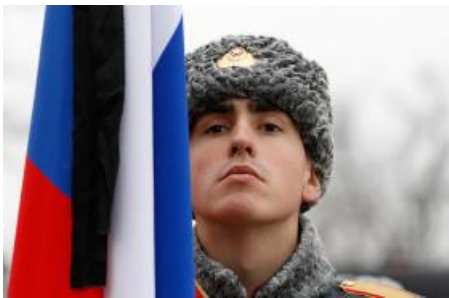
Meanwhile, the electoral victory of the Palestinian Islamists of Hamas last week will have a ripple effect across the region.

The grief and media coverage of the hundredth death will make this a difficult week. But whatever the political rhetoric, we should be grateful that, in Kipling's words, there are still Brits who are prepared to "go to their Gaud like a soldier".

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The Evening Standard

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