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Lessons Learned from the Basra Fighting for the Iraq Hearings

By James Phillips

Congress tomorrow will begin a second round of hearings on Iraq featuring General David Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. A major topic is likely to be the recent round of fighting in Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, and its implications for U.S. policy.

Although the clashes in Basra have been widely misreported as a one-sided defeat for Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's coalition government, the reality is that the battle for Basra demonstrated that the Iraqi government is capable of taking the initiative and inflicting severe losses on militias supported by Iran, a fact that will boost its support among Sunni Iraqis and Sunni Arab states. Moreover, the fact that the chaos in Basra was in part created by the premature withdrawal of British troops, which allowed militias and gangs to proliferate, underscores the importance of maintaining adequate U.S. military forces in Iraq until Iraqi security forces are strong enough to safeguard Iraq's security on their own.

The fighting in Basra began on March 25 after Prime Minister Maliki ordered Iraqi army and police forces to crack down on illegal militias and heavily armed gangs that have long operated with impunity in Basra, the strategic city through which much of Iraq's oil exports flow. The government issued an ultimatum that gave "outlaw" groups 72 hours to disarm and get off the streets. But when the Iraqi troops entered the city, they were met with stiff resistance from the Mahdi Army, the Iran-backed militia of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The security forces made progress in clearing some neigh-

borhoods but failed to disarm the bulk of the Mahdi Army, which launched counterattacks in Shiite areas of Baghdad and several cities in southern Iraq, the Shiite heartland. Iraqi forces contained these Mahdi Army counteroffensives with minimal American assistance, but they were forced to call in U.S. air power to overcome Sadr's militia in some of its fortified strongholds in Basra.

After the initial government offensive in Basra was slowed by poor planning and the failure to anticipate heavy resistance, two representatives of the United Iraqi Alliance, the ruling Shiite coalition, went to Iran to press Moqtada al-Sadr to curb his militia. He has moved to the Iranian city of Qum to burnish his limited religious credentials. They also met with the head of the Quds Force, the elite special forces unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, to press Iran to cut arms supplies to the militias. Iran reportedly helped broker a truce between the Iraqi government and its militia allies and al-Sadr ordered his militia to halt its attacks and stand down on March 30, leaving government forces in control of most of Basra.

Implications of the Basra Fighting for U.S. Policy. From the standpoint of U.S. Iraq policy, the

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upsurge in fighting in Basra leads to several preliminary conclusions:

- *The Iraqi government's campaign to extend the rule of law to Basra was a step in the right direction.* Prime Minister Maliki's determination to attack the Mahdi Army is a good sign that his government actively seeks to accept more responsibility and has distanced itself from al-Sadr and Iran. Although Maliki may have overreached and underestimated the strength of the Mahdi Army in Basra, government forces inflicted heavy losses on the Sadrists militia. The Iraqi security forces won a limited victory, braced by embedded American advisers and supported by American air power, but some Iraqi army and police units performed poorly or balked at performing their missions.

While Maliki did not achieve his declared goal of compelling the Mahdi Army to disarm, he did force al-Sadr to order his followers to stand down. Sadr, for his part, demonstrated that he retains strong influence, if not control, over much of the Mahdi Army, which has fragmented in recent years. Significantly, the Mahdi Army was unable to mount as great a challenge as it did in launching uprisings in 2004. Moreover, Sadr apparently learned his own lessons from past defeats and reached a cease-fire before American and British forces were drawn more heavily into the fighting.

- *Prime Minister Maliki has strengthened his nationalist credentials.* By taking personal political risks to counter militias from his own Shia sect, Maliki has shed at least some of his former reputation as a sectarian figure. Critics had questioned his willingness to strike at Shia militants. In fact, the U.S. Congress had included the initiation of stronger Iraqi government actions against Shia militias as one of the congressional benchmarks for measuring progress in Iraq.

Congress should now welcome the fact that there has been considerable progress in this area. Many Iraqi Sunni leaders have applauded the government offensive in Basra, and this demonstrated willingness to challenge Iran-backed militants could lead to greater Sunni political support for the government in the future. The

Basra campaign may also increase the chances of greater international support from Sunni Arab states by dispelling their suspicion that the Maliki government is too close to Iran.

- *Iraq's security situation is fragile and the U.S. cannot afford to risk withdrawing troops too soon.* Basra became infested with rival Shia militias and criminal gangs in part because British troops withdrew prematurely from the city, leaving a power vacuum for them to exploit before strong government authority could be established. The British withdrew to the airport outside the city last September and announced plans to reduce their force of 5,000 troops to about 2,500 by summer. They now have frozen their withdrawal plans and continue to maintain about 4,000 troops in the area, which is still too low. The United States should seek to avoid the British mistake and maintain as many troops in Iraq as long as possible to assist Iraqi security forces, which still cannot succeed on their own.
- *Iran exploited the Basra situation and will gain much more influence in Iraq if the next Administration rapidly withdraws U.S. troops.* Iran's radical regime exploited the anarchy in Basra to cultivate greater influence over rival Shia political parties and militias. Iran's role in brokering a cease-fire led Mahmood Othman, a Kurdish member of the Iraqi parliament, to complain: "They make problems. Then they end it the way they like."

Basra is a microcosm of what Tehran wants Iraq to become: an unstable arena for competing extremist militias that Iran can manipulate to prevent the emergence of a stable government that might threaten Iranian interests. President Mahmood Ahmadinejad has crowed that once the U.S. withdraws, "Soon we will see a huge power vacuum in the region. Of course, we are prepared to fill the gap..." In doing so, Iran seeks to transform Iraq into another Lebanon, a failed multi-sectarian state that is conducive to the flourishing of radical Shia militias that Iran can exploit for its own purposes.

The Bottom Line. The Maliki government's offensive in Basra sought to accomplish goals that the United States should support: weakening the

Mahdi Army and other gangs supported by Iran. But the operation was poorly planned and executed and did not achieve the ambitious goals initially set out by Prime Minister Maliki. Although the Iraqi government did make some progress in curbing the militias in Basra, the campaign also demonstrated the continuing need for U.S. troops in Iraq. Members of Congress should keep this in mind when

they question General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker this week.

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