

WHERE IS IRAQ HEADING? LESSONS FROM BASRA

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WHERE IS IRAQ HEADING? LESSONS FROM BASRA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Amid the media and military focus on Baghdad, another major Iraqi city – Basra – is being overlooked. Yet Basra's experience carries important lessons for the capital and nation as a whole. Coalition forces have already implemented a security plan there, Operation Sinbad, which was in many ways similar to Baghdad's current military surge. What U.S. commanders call "clear, hold and build", their British counterparts earlier had dubbed "clear, hold and civil reconstruction". And, as in the capital, the putative goal was to pave the way for a takeover by Iraqi forces. Far from being a model to be replicated, however, Basra is an example of what to avoid. With renewed violence and instability, Basra illustrates the pitfalls of a transitional process that has led to collapse of the state apparatus and failed to build legitimate institutions. Fierce intra-Shiite fighting also disproves the simplistic view of Iraq neatly divided between three homogenous communities.

Lack of attention to Basra is understandable. Iraq's future is often believed to depend on Baghdad, and most of the spectacular bombings have taken place in the centre of the country, far from the southern city. Observers, by now accustomed to the capital's dynamics, have had difficulty making sense of Basra's and so have tended to downplay them. Finally, because U.S. forces have not been directly involved, news coverage has been both limited to Arabic and British media and forced to compete with the gruesome violence that is tearing the centre apart.

But to neglect Basra is a mistake. The nation's second largest city, it is located in its most oil-rich region. Basra governorate also is the only region enjoying maritime access, making it the country's de facto economic capital and a significant prize for local political actors. Sandwiched between Iran and the Gulf monarchies, at the intersection of the Arab and Persian worlds, the region is strategically important. Sociologically, Basra's identity essentially has been forged in opposition not only to the capital but also to other major southern cities such as Najaf and Karbala. For these reasons, it is wrong either to ignore it or lump it together with an imaginary, undifferentiated Shiite south.

On its face, Basra's security plan ranked as a qualified success. Between September 2006 and March 2007, Operation Sinbad sought to rout out militias and hand security over to newly vetted and stronger Iraqi security forces while kick-starting economic reconstruction. Criminality, political assassinations and sectarian killings, all of which were rampant in 2006, receded somewhat and – certainly as compared to elsewhere in the country – a relative calm prevailed. Yet this reality was both superficial and fleeting. By March–April 2007, renewed political tensions once more threatened to destabilise the city, and relentless attacks against British forces in effect had driven them off the streets into increasingly secluded compounds. Basra's residents and militiamen view this not as an orderly withdrawal but rather as an ignominious defeat. Today, the city is controlled by militias, seemingly more powerful and unconstrained than before.

What progress has occurred cannot conceal the most glaring failing of all: the inability to establish a legitimate and functioning provincial apparatus capable of redistributing resources, imposing respect for the rule of law and ensuring a peaceful transition at the local level. Basra's political arena remains in the hands of actors engaged in bloody competition for resources, undermining what is left of governorate institutions and coercively enforcing their rule. The local population has no choice but to seek protection from one of the dominant camps. Periods of stability do not reflect greater governing authority so much as they do a momentary – and fragile – balance of interests or of terror between rival militias. Inevitably, conflicts re-emerge and even apparently minor incidents can set off a cycle of retaliatory violence. A political process designed to pacify competition and ensure the non-violent allocation of goods and power has become a source of intense and often brutal struggle.

Basra is a case study of Iraq's multiple and multiplying forms of violence. These often have little to do with sectarianism or anti-occupation resistance. Instead, they involve the systematic misuse of official institutions, political assassinations, tribal vendettas, neighbourhood vigilantism and enforcement of social mores, together with the rise of criminal mafias that increasingly intermingle with political actors. Should other causes of

strife – sectarian violence and the fight against coalition forces – recede, the concern must still be that Basra's fate will be replicated throughout the country on a larger, more chaotic and more dangerous scale. The lessons are clear. Iraq's violence is multifaceted, and sectarianism is only one of its sources. It follows that the country's division along supposedly inherent and homogenous confessional and ethnic lines is not an answer. It follows, too, that rebuilding the state, tackling militias and imposing the rule of law cannot be done without confronting the parties that currently dominate the political process and forging a new and far more inclusive political compact.

Iraq is in the midst of a civil war. But before and beyond that, Iraq has become a failed state – a country whose institutions and, with them, any semblance of national cohesion, have been obliterated. That is what has made the violence – *all* the violence: sectarian, anti-coalition, political, criminal and otherwise – both possible and, for many, necessary. Resolving the confrontation between Sunni Arabs, Shiites and Kurds is one priority. But rebuilding a functioning and legitimate state is another – no less urgent, no less important and no less daunting.

Damascus/Amman/Brussels, 25 June 2007

WHERE IS IRAQ HEADING? LESSONS FROM BASRA

I. CHARACTERISTICS

A. DIVERSITY

Basra is a pluralistic, socially diverse city. Although most inhabitants are Shiites, it also is home to sizeable communities of Sunnis (Arab and Kurdish), Christians (chiefly Chaldaean, Assyrian and Armenian) and Mandaeans, a pre-Islamic Gnostic sect.¹ The impact of these minorities can be felt in several neighbourhoods, such as 'Ashshar and Suq al-Shaykh. As a port city, Basra has attracted a wide variety of merchants (including the Khudhayri, Garibian, Salih, Asfar and Naqib families) and, with strong ties to the outside world, traditionally has enjoyed a high degree of inter-communal tolerance. After the eighth century, the city also included a black minority (Zinj), which further enriched its diversity. Basra's vibrant pluralism – expressed in a variety of poetry, theatre and African-inspired songs – powerfully shaped culture, both before and after the establishment of modern-day Iraq.

Prior to the nationwide outbreak of sectarian violence in 2006, its residents prided themselves on being cosmopolitan. The dean of a Basra university said:

People in Basra have always wanted to live in peace, accepting others regardless of their sectarian or religious identity. Christians live beside Muslims and Sunnis beside Shiites. At one point, we even had a large Jewish minority. We are used to living amid such diversity. People have always been accustomed to living with foreigners and members of other faiths. Christians, Jews and Muslims in Basra were never fanatics. Indeed they were rather open-minded.²

Other factors account for the pluralism of the city and its immediate environs. Historically, the region of Basra and, more generally, the south, was populated by nomadic and sedentary Sunni tribes, although Shiite minorities dwelled in the city and its surroundings, notably Qurna.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most sedentary tribes converted to Shiism.³ There were some exceptions, most notably the al-Sa'dun who ruled over the Muntafiq, a vast tribal confederation. As a result the tribal makeup was predominantly Shiite, with residual but deep-rooted Sunni pockets such as Zubayr, south west of Basra.

During the nineteenth century, the city's role as an administrative centre grew and it attracted large numbers of civil servants from other areas of the country. Given the Ottoman Empire's preference, these often belonged to the Sunni bourgeoisie. Oil discovery and state modernisation in the twentieth century further accelerated the influx of bureaucrats, specialised workers, teachers and engineers from Baghdad and elsewhere. By mid-century, even before the oil industry had developed, a Westernised, urban middle class had emerged. A university professor described it:

It was a glorious age. Basra residents were open to different cultures while simultaneously protecting their own. Here, music and food always have been diverse. But we also used to go to the theatre. Everything was modern and civilised. All along the waterfront were an international circus, swimming pools and casinos. We used to have fun riding boats. But since those blessed days, most educated people and artists have left.⁴

From the early 1930s until the first coup against the monarchy in 1958, the agricultural sector suffered a severe economic crisis which led to a significant rural exodus. Later, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, the former regime's decision to drain the marshlands – which historically had provided sanctuary to opposition members, deserters and criminals – and forcibly transfer its inhabitants triggered another mass movement toward urban areas. Both waves brought in new inhabitants, leading to tensions with the established local bourgeoisie. Migrants of tribal origin tended to populate neighbourhoods at the old city's periphery, such as Jumhuriya, Asma'i, Husayn, Hayaniya, Khamsa Miles and Tannuma.

¹ To Crisis Group's knowledge, no reliable data on the makeup of Basra's society exists.

² Crisis Group interview, dean of a Basra university, Basra, March 2005.

³ Yitzhak Nakash, "The Conversion of Iraq's Tribes to Shiism", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, no. 3, 1994.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, Basra university professor, Basra, March 2005.

In the aftermath of the regime's ouster in 2003, these recently urbanised areas became more assertive. In particular, the Hayaniya, whose history and make-up are highly reminiscent of Baghdad's Sadr City, became a Sadrist stronghold.⁵ As governorate structures collapsed, tribes assumed an increasingly important political role. Some tribal chiefs organised themselves politically, for example by joining the Iraqi Federal Assembly established in December 2004;⁶ many joined pre-existing parties at the time of the 2005 elections.

Relations between longer-term Basra dwellers and recently urbanised tribes remain tense, tainted by prejudice. Tribal members are considered unable to assimilate to urban life and are accused of crimes and moral vices. In the aftermath of Saddam's ouster, one tribe in particular, the Garamsha, became the symbol of what supposedly was wrong with them all. In the words of a Basra journalist:

The Garamsha fled the marshes and took refuge in the city when Saddam Hussein destroyed their traditional habitat. At that point, they faced the difficulties of urban life. In the marshes, they had neither school nor hospital. None of them had a university diploma or a profession. In short, they had a very hard time assimilating, and many were involved in theft and brawls. Some, after having sold their herd, bought boats and got caught up in black market trafficking. Of course, not all Garamsha are like that. In fact, many are very nice and generous. But they suffer from widespread prejudice toward the Ma'dan [a word now commonly used to describe those from the marshes, shorthand for backward and undeveloped].⁷

Basra's Shiite community itself is diverse. A large minority of Shaykhiya lives alongside the more mainstream Usuliya strand of Twelver Shiite Islam (to which both Iraq's leading Shiite religious figure, Ali al-Sistani, and

Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei belong).⁸ Unlike most Iraqi Shiites, who choose their Marja ("source of emulation") from among leading religious scholars from Najaf and Karbala in Iraq or Qom and Mashhad in Iran, the Shaykhiya do not recognise any ayatollah's authority. Instead, they follow their own communal leader, Ali al-Musawi, who also heads Shaykhiya minorities in Karbala, Iran and the Gulf. The Shaykhiya shun any political role, accepting the legitimacy of earthly power.⁹ Their wealth, based on agriculture, real estate and voluntary contributions to Musawi, has further consolidated their status in the city despite lingering bias.¹⁰

Tensions notwithstanding, Basra long was proud of its social, religious and cultural diversity. That has radically changed, an outcome of its rapid Islamisation and the growth of sectarianism among its political class. Its tradition of tolerance and open-mindedness – shared not only by the bourgeoisie and more recently urbanised residents,¹¹ but also religious circles¹² – has been thoroughly undone by the rise of Islamist movements.

⁸ The founder of the Shaykhiya school of thought, Ahmad al-Ahsa'i (deceased in 1826), developed an esoteric theology according to which the community's imam, as one of the few "perfect Shiites", enjoys a direct spiritual relationship with the hidden imam, the last of a lineage of twelve "infallible" imams recognised by Twelver Shiites. For a description of Twelver Shiism, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, p.19.

⁹ The Shaykhiya, therefore, were treated relatively leniently by Saddam's regime. Their mosque, built between 1982 and 1997 during a period of intense repression of Shiite militancy, is one of the city's largest and certainly its most visible. It can hold up to 12,000 people. Crisis Group interview, Zayn al-Din Salih al-Musawi, Ali al-Musawi's spokesman, Basra, March 2005.

¹⁰ The Shaykhiya are routinely described as non-Twelvers by other Shiites in Basra. Aside from theological differences, a popular theory among Basra residents is that the Shaykhiya – locally known as Awlad Amir or Hasawiya – are of Saudi rather than Iraqi extraction. Although this is true of the movement's founder, its followers in Basra undoubtedly are Iraqi. Crisis Group interviews, variety of Basrawis, Basra, 2006–2007.

¹¹ Marsh tribes practice a specific and relatively flexible faith. For as long as it was possible, their sheikhs openly disapproved of the political scene's Islamisation, for instance criticising Ali al-Sistani's support for Sharia as the sole source of law. Crisis Group interviews, tribal chiefs, Basra, March 2005. As one put it, "we want a secular government, federal and tolerant. We don't want a religious state. We hate the idea of a single party or of one-person rule to begin with. But we also don't want Sharia law. We accept it as a reference, not as a main rule. One should respect all human beings and I, for one, favour women's rights". Crisis Group interview, Basra, March 2005.

¹² The daughter of one of the city's leading religious figures complained of the brutality of certain Islamist groups. "The way they are trying to impose their rules is a very bad thing. Islam is a peaceful religion". Crisis Group interview, Basra, March 2005.

⁵ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 June 2006, p. 5. It is said to have become a refuge for many Sadrist commanders fleeing the Baghdad "surge": "Since the Americans put pressure on us in Baghdad, as a result of the surge plan, many Mahdi Army commanders fled and came to Basra. Most often, they originate from the south, either Maysan or Basra. They come straight to Hayaniya, whose inhabitants are also from Maysan. With their help and expertise, we've managed to organise our operation far more efficiently. They're strong you know!" Crisis Group interview, local Mahdi Army commander, Basra, June 2007.

⁶ The Iraqi Federal Assembly includes local personalities of tribal and non-tribal origin. It advocates a type of "administrative federalism", in other words greater local managerial autonomy. Crisis Group interview, five tribal chiefs active in the Iraqi Federal Assembly, Basra, March 2005.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006.

Almost immediately upon the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, they established a presence at universities and hospitals which, through intimidation and violence, they gradually took over. With the state's collapse, armed Islamist groups sought to fill the security vacuum, fighting crime and rigidly policing social mores, but also engaging in illicit behaviour such as oil trafficking.¹³

The January 2005 elections for parliament and local councils, far from opening up the political field, formalised the domination of Islamist parties, notably the Sadrist current, al-Fadhila (a Sadrist spin-off, founded in 2003 by the Najaf-based cleric Muhammad al-Ya'qubi and whose popular base is concentrated in Basra), the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, recently renamed Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, SIIC)¹⁴ and Tha'r Allah, an exclusively local party formed by Yusif al-Musawi.

[In Basra] the January elections were marred by violent intimidation beforehand and equally brutal intimidation afterwards....Sadrist factions and SCIRI affiliates such as Badr and Tha'r Allah accelerated their intimidation of local university professors, trade unionists and other secular figures. Most Iraqis were forced under the protective umbrella of enforced party membership, and those who attempted to make a stand were intimidated and sometimes killed.¹⁵

After the elections, fear spread throughout the city. Hospitals largely fell under Islamist control and, with rare exceptions, came under intense and increasing pressure.¹⁶

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, oil smugglers complaining about this newfound competition, Basra, October 2003. One Islamist party leader, who claimed to have led resistance to Saddam Hussein's regime, was widely known as having long been involved in smuggling – an activity that presupposed close relations with Saddam's local henchmen.

¹⁴ In an 11 May 2007 statement, SCIRI announced it was dropping the word "Revolution" from its name to reflect what it called the new situation in Iraq. *Al-Hayat*, 12 May 2007.

¹⁵ Michael Knights and Ed Williams, "The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus #66, February 2007, p. 27.

¹⁶ "Yesterday again a message was sent to me by the Sadrists through the general director for hospitals. They once more raised the issue of male doctors caring for female patients. They sent a letter summoning me to their headquarters. I responded that I had nothing to do with them, that I am an official and that any request should be addressed to the governorate or ministry of health. Six months ago, they already had tried to impose their rules in my hospital but I prevented them. Had I let them, we would have Sadr posters all over the walls. But they control most of the other hospitals. Some even had to change their name. For instance, the teaching hospital is now called the Sadr

Women university students – Muslims but also Christians – were forced to wear a veil.¹⁷ This repressive atmosphere was epitomised by a tragic incident in which Sadrists hit a woman attending a student picnic, tore off her clothes and then shot to death two students who tried to intervene – all in front of the police. The girl, humiliated, killed herself shortly thereafter.¹⁸ Despite widespread outrage, the culprits reportedly went unpunished.¹⁹ Indeed, the very topic of social and political Islamisation became taboo:

It is a highly sensitive issue. We have not been able to debate it openly because everyone is scared. If I express my opinion, I will get into real trouble. Islamists will accuse me of not being a real Muslim – which I am. My daughters are being forced to wear a *hijab*, but it's deeper than that. I once was lecturing on the issue of corruption in the south and on oil-related pollution. One of those guys came up to me and suggested I might need a security detail because I could be targeted. Basically, he was telling me to steer clear of anything affecting their interests. Some people have been killed despite bodyguards. It can happen anywhere, anytime.²⁰

This trend accelerated in 2006, with a dramatic escalation in homicides.²¹ Victims included pragmatic, secular figures

hospital". Crisis Group interview, hospital director, Basra, March 2005.

¹⁷ "My students are all pressured to wear a veil. They are afraid. Those people say that even Christian women should wear the *hijab*. Two of my Armenian friends have begun to wear it. When I saw them, I said 'what are you doing, how can you give up?' They said they were afraid. I gave up mini-skirts long ago. We are a conservative society anyway. But wearing the *hijab*, that's something entirely different". Crisis Group interview, Christian professor at Basra University, Basra, March 2005.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, university students, Basra, March 2005.

¹⁹ "The fact that religious groups are taking control of the city is extremely worrying. I think that ultimately we will have to fight to get them off campus grounds. Most people resent these young religious hotheads. After the picnic incident, tribal leaders got together and issued a communiqué declaring their support for the students and condemning the violence. But most people fear the Sadrists. It's not that they have so much real power. But they have the power to kill and frighten. For instance, we heard that twelve barbers were killed around the country because they had shaved off beards. The Islamists are installing a climate of fear. The authorities did not utter a word after the picnic incident because they, too, are afraid". Crisis Group interview, Basra university professor, Basra, March 2005.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Basra University researcher, Basra, March 2005.

²¹ The number of reported homicide victims climbed steadily from a monthly rate of fifteen in November 2005 to 30 in February 2006 and over 100 in the following months. "Basrah

– university professors, journalists, human rights activists, trade unionists, communists and other intellectuals – but also people killed purely based on sectarian affiliation. Sunnis, who already had been targeted under the guise of de-Baathification, came under heightened attack after the February 2006 destruction of the Shiite mosque in Samarra, which triggered countrywide retaliation.²² For various reasons members of other minorities, notably Christians, were forced to flee.²³ Tribal chiefs who opposed or challenged the Islamist movements' enhanced control were not spared; many were summarily killed.²⁴ The end result has been an effective, Islamist-led purge that eradicated Basra's liberal political culture.

B. "SOUTHERNISM"

A central element of Basra's identity involves its relationship to the rest of the country, often summed up as *Janubiya* ("southernism").²⁵ Residents long have resented the central state for simultaneously ostracising and taking advantage of them, acting both as freeloader and repressor. A local religious leader lamented that even though the governorate provides most of the central state's revenue and possesses the country's most important

power plant, "our electricity share is meagre".²⁶ Virtually all inhabitants blame the former regime for failing to invest in local infrastructure and public services despite their heavy sacrifices, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war.²⁷ As a result of its authoritarian and predatory behaviour, the state widely came to be seen as an alien, intrusive power depriving the city of its own wealth. A university professor said:

Particularly after the 1968 coup [which brought the Baath Party to power], our economic and social life was entirely controlled by Baghdad. Everything – factories, local administration, social services – was under the capital's thumb. The intelligence service was omnipresent on every street corner. We lived as if under occupation. They tried to cut our lives to pieces. They didn't want us to possess our own identity.²⁸

With only few exceptions, local leaders originated from other areas of the country:

For many years, Basra inhabitants were ignored in their own city. No one – not the governor, police chief, or commander of the local army garrison or officer in charge of seaports – hailed from there. It was absurd. Basra is wealthy, with significant oil, agricultural and maritime resources. But this did not benefit the city. Had the governor been from Basra, he would have known and cared about the local people. But let me give you a simple example: in 1991, *al-Sabah* newspaper profiled the various governors who had been in power in Basra until then. Out of 41 governors, only one came from the city.²⁹

Basra inhabitants also are convinced that state institutions and major Shiite political parties have privileged other Shiite centres – Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf – at their expense, as a result of rampant anti-southern

Governorate Assessment Report", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), August 2006, pp. 8-9.

²² See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

²³ See *The New York Times*, 31 July 2005; also "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq", The Brookings Institution – University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement Occasional Paper, October 2006. That said, Basra's Christians are better off than its Sunnis. As a priest put it, "in Basra, Christians tend to be less targeted because we don't play a part in the wider sectarian conflict. Many Christians left Basra for economic reasons, traveling up north or to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West in the hope of finding better opportunities. The ongoing political struggle in Basra has indeed deprived Christians of job opportunities insofar as influential political parties apportioned state jobs among themselves. Those who stayed behind for the most part have kept a low profile and sought to maintain peaceful relations with other groups in the city". Crisis Group interview, a priest, Basra, March 2007.

²⁴ "Twenty five tribal chiefs recently were assassinated, including three from the Bani Asad, the head of the al-'Isa, the head of the Albu Mohammad and three heads of al-Garamsha. After the fall of the former regime, most tribal chiefs got involved in lawful and unlawful commerce and competed with politicians. This often led to fighting. Some of the most influential tribal chiefs – for example those with electoral influence – were killed for that reason. Today, the tribes hate political parties". Crisis Group interview, teacher, Basra, August 2006.

²⁵ An alternative translation is "southernness".

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, religious leader, Basra, March 2005.

²⁷ This sense of suffering is a recurring theme among Basra's inhabitants. "Our suffering over the past 35 years has been particularly harsh. Under Saddam, our sons had to work as soldiers and manual labourers and were barred from public service jobs. A large segment of Basra's population had to emigrate because of what they suffered under the former regime. The city is full of war orphans and widows. People live in old houses that are falling apart for lack of upkeep. The entire city has only two orphanages and three hospitals. Many people are sick due to pollution and poor healthcare. In the palm fields, three to four people are killed daily as a result of unexploded ordnance. And all this is just a fragment of our suffering". Crisis Group interview, Basra parliament member, Basra, March 2005.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Basra university professor, Basra, March 2005.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, religious leader, Basra, March 2005.

discrimination.³⁰ Neither the former regime's ouster nor the ensuing political process is believed to have rectified this. The local population remains adamant that it is being both ignored and taken advantage of. A Basra parliamentarian said:

Despite Iraq's liberation, we are still suffering. And regardless of all our suffering, we still can't boast of a single minister coming from Basra. Among 35 Iraqi ambassadors dispatched around the world, not one is from Basra, although Basra is full of highly educated people. Among the 600 employees working in the ministry of foreign affairs, not one is from Basra. In the army's command, no one is from Basra. In the national assembly, we have twelve seats, whereas Najaf, whose population is much smaller, has 30. Our share of government funding is probably less than Falluja's. Meanwhile, we are responsible for some 80 per cent of the country's economic wealth. We have oil, agriculture, fishing, we produce natural gas and generate tax revenue from our seaports and land border crossings. We have immense wealth, and yet see nothing of it. We keep asking the central government to give us our fair share but we have basically lost any trust in it.³¹

Though not much remains of the Iraqi state, what does it highly centralised.³² State-imposed restrictions on local government generate significant resentment. Residents believe that long delays in allocating Basra's budget result from wilful discrimination.³³ Although they may in fact

largely be a function of more generalised bureaucratic overload, they nevertheless reinforce local resentment of state underinvestment and micromanagement.

Convinced they are being dominated by central authorities, Basra residents have urged greater administrative and managerial autonomy. In February 2004, the governor revived an old separatist dream,³⁴ arguing that Basra and its governorate should become another Dubai, a region in control of its wealth and acting as the country's economic engine.³⁵ From 2005 onwards, a consensus has formed in Basra around the idea of strengthening local government. Virtually all those interviewed by Crisis Group advocated a form of "administrative federalism" (*Fidraliya Idariya*), short of secession yet heavy on local management of everyday matters. A university dean explained:

What does it mean concretely? We consider sectarian or ethnic forms of federalism dangerous for the country's unity. In our eyes, federalism has more to do with practical things. It is not good that all institutions remain centralised in Baghdad. We should have one army and our ambassadors should represent all of Iraq. But on financial and administrative matters, we need our local government to be able to make decisions. Take my case: I am totally unknown in Baghdad, yet someone in Baghdad, with no knowledge either of Basra's needs or of my ability to satisfy them, nominated me. There is no justification for such centralisation of local governance issues.³⁶

The bureaucracy's high centralisation is a source of anger among all social strata. Some complain of having to visit the capital for the most basic administrative tasks. Entrepreneurs claim Baghdad's long-distance interference undermines local economic development.³⁷ Health

³⁰ See Reidar Visser's excellent article "Basra, the Reluctant Seat of Shiastan", *Middle East Report* no. 242, spring 2007.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, parliamentarian, Basra, March 2005.

³² "We have been working under a centralised system for decades. We have suffered a lot from this and from Baghdad more generally. It's always been about receiving orders from above. People here are not listened to. They can do a lot for themselves – in terms of economic, social, educational and health matters. But there is an obstacle, which is the state bureaucracy, which controls everything. We have to change it". Crisis Group interview, member of a Basra research centre, Basra, March 2005.

³³ "The city's budget for last year was sent by Baghdad in June 2006. The central government is incapable of helping the local government deliver public services. That's why the local government could not carry out basic projects". Crisis Group interview, member of Basra's municipal council, Basra, March 2007. The argument is invoked by officials as an excuse for the governorate's own failings, which allegedly include widespread corruption and diversion of local resources. No funding reached Basra in 2005, and in 2006 90 per cent of the city's allocated budget was available only at the end of the year. Crisis Group interview, Department for International Development (DFID) official, London, February 2007. Regardless of who actually

was responsible, Basra's governor conveniently was able to blame the central government for the absence of reconstruction.

³⁴ See Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Münster, 2005).

³⁵ See *Gulf News*, 24 February 2004. Many Basra businessmen echoed this call: "Let's say Basra's income represents 90 per cent of Iraq's. I'm not saying Basra's budget should be much higher than the rest, but that one needs to pay particular attention to the city's needs. The more Basra develops into a wealthy economic area, the more revenue it will generate for the rest of the country. If you develop other parts of the country at Basra's expense, we all lose". Crisis Group interview, member of local chamber of commerce, Basra, March 2005.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, dean at Basra university, Basra, March 2005.

³⁷ "We need more economic freedom. Any commercial law, financial decision or development plan comes from the centre but the centre does not understand our needs. We should suggest to the centre what we need, not the other way

workers blame delays and disorganisation on the absence of local decision-making authority.³⁸ Hovering over all this is recurring fear that, some day, a tyrannical central government might re-emerge. “As you know, we suffered a lot from the central government. Excessive centralisation leads to dictatorial systems. If we favour federalism it also is in order to minimise the risk of a new, oppressive and undemocratic central government”.³⁹

The March 2004 adoption of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) – Iraq’s interim constitution, pursuant to which any three governorates could establish a federal region – led the southern governorates of Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar to combine efforts.⁴⁰ This reflected both similar strategic interests and shared hostility to the centre. The notion of a “southern region” (*Iqlim al-Janub*) was particularly attractive to intellectuals, tribal leaders with roots in all three governorates and political parties with an essentially local power base such as Fadhila.⁴¹ Basra representatives of national political parties gradually had to echo the increasingly popular call, leading to tensions and contradictions with their Baghdad-based headquarters. As a Sadrist figure in Basra explained, “our leader, Moqtada al-Sadr, is against federalism. Officially, Sadrists oppose it because it is a divisive factor as long as we are under occupation. But personally, I believe in it because I believe southern Iraq has its own identity, and I believe we should have a greater share of resources”.⁴²

around”. Crisis Group interview, businessman, Basra, March 2005.

³⁸ “Centralisation is the core of the problem. For instance, if we need fluid for patients, Baghdad might give all of Basra governorate 10,000 bottles while, in the capital, every single hospital will get 40,000. Bottles that come through the port of Umm Qasr, some 40 miles away, are all sent to Baghdad, where we have to dispatch trucks to pick up our share – an amazing waste of time and money. Take another example: the decision to build a new pediatric hospital in Basra was taken by the ministry of health, the project was handed over to someone from central Iraq, and we were never consulted about any of this”. Crisis Group interview, hospital director, Basra, March 2005.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, tribal chief, Basra, March 2005. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Basra’s Sunni population does not necessarily favour a strong central government, even one headed by co-religionists. “We prefer a federal, non-sectarian solution. A federal system would mean no dictatorship and no centralised bureaucracy”. Crisis Group interview, Sunni imam, Basra, August 2006.

⁴⁰ Iraq’s permanent constitution, ratified in a popular vote in October 2005, allows any number of governorates to create a region.

⁴¹ See Reidar Visser, “Basra, the Reluctant Seat of Shiastan”, *op. cit.*

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Basra, March 2005. “Regional sentiment in the far south of Iraq is very pronounced and often

In late 2004 and early 2005, several relatively small political movements emerged whose platform focused almost exclusively on this southern federalist agenda. These include the Iraq Federal Assembly and the Council for the Southern Region, both of which opened offices in Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar.⁴³ From time to time over the past two and a half years, they have sought to re-energise the debate, triggering sharp polemics and angry reactions from those who believe any type of federalism threatens national unity and those who (like SCIRI) argue for a broader region encompassing all nine Shiite-majority governorates in the south and centre (*Iqlim al-Wasat wal-Janub*). For example, on 14 April 2007, the Council for the Southern Region organised yet another conference advocating formation of a southern region comprising Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar governorates.

The question of federalism and its precise contours has become a central tool in the struggle for political control over Basra. In the main, it is a tug-of-war between Fadhila (a member of which, Muhammad al-Wa’ili, was elected in February 2005 to head the governorate) and SCIRI (which briefly controlled it after the November 2004 appointment of Hasan al-Rashid as governor).⁴⁴ For Fadhila, a southern region limited to the three resource-rich governorates is highly appealing because the party has virtually no following elsewhere in the country. In contrast, SCIRI’s alternative project of a much broader region, which it has canvassed since 2005, is seen by Fadhila as a serious threat since it would significantly dilute its influence. Even though SCIRI’s presence in

overrides the national parties’ central leaderships’ ideology. This has been seen in Fadhila (which always had stronger popular support in Basra than anywhere else) and Dawa [the Harakat al-Da’wa al-Islamiya branch] as well as among Maysan Sadrists (who sometimes employ regionalist rhetoric when it comes to oil matters), and even among Basra’s SCIRI members (some of whom still focus on Basra and the far south even after the central leadership declared their goal to be a single Shiite region comprising all nine majority Shiite governorates)”. Crisis Group email communication with Reidar Visser, 15 April 2007.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, representatives of the Iraq Federal Assembly and the Council for the Southern Region, Basra, March 2005.

⁴⁴ Fadhila won twelve of 41 seats in the January 2005 governorate council elections. Although the “Basra Islamic” list – a coalition – won twenty, Fadhila emerged as the strongest party. Moreover, it formed an alliance with former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord, which won four seats, and the Iraq Future Gathering, a small formation that won two seats, and later reached a deal with Harakat al-Dawa al-Islamiya, whose three seats gave it a total of 21 sympathisers. The council subsequently elected Al-Wa’li governor in a secret ballot. The positions of deputy governor and president of the governorate council went, respectively, to Lu’ay al-Battat, head of the Iraq Future Gathering, and Muhammad al-Abadi, of Fadhila.

Basra remains limited, it used its strong parliamentary representation and alliance with the Kurds to pass a bill enabling it to promote its own federal agenda.⁴⁵

The confrontation between SCIRI and Fadhila over federalism has taken various forms. SCIRI has sought to keep Basra under Baghdad's control long enough to force through a large Shi'ite federal region, while Fadhila has tried to strengthen Basra's autonomy. SCIRI lost ground after key governorate positions fell under Fadhila's control but in May 2006 Fadhila was stripped of the oil ministry in the central government, leading it to redouble its efforts in the southern city. Both parties have periodically used violence, formed alliances with other local organisations⁴⁶ and resorted to economic ploys. In recent weeks, large demonstrations have been organised by a coalition of Fadhila detractors, including SCIRI and the Sadrists, with the aim of toppling the governor.⁴⁷ Taking advantage of its influence in Baghdad, SCIRI supported a Kurdish drive to open the oil sector to foreign investment and thus enhance its own position as a key interlocutor for outsiders. Fadhila tried to counter these efforts, going so far as to cut off electricity to Baghdad in retaliation.⁴⁸ The outcome of this struggle remains undecided.

C. FOREIGN INTERFERENCE

Basra residents generally share a fear of and distaste for foreign meddling. The city's location and abundant natural resources have boosted its strategic importance to neighbouring Iran and the Gulf monarchies. The struggle opposing Iran on the one hand and Arab regimes

as well as the West on the other has heightened the local sense of vulnerability. A political leader explained:

The local conflict cannot be separated from the broader struggle between West [Gulf states and Western countries] and East [Iran] because of Basra's strategic location and vast resources. In the 1980s we found ourselves stuck between Saddam and his Western and Arab allies on one side and Iran on the other. In the 1990s, we were caught between the regime and its former allies. Now, Basra is at the crossroads of an Iranian-American struggle, an Iranian-Arab struggle, the struggle between factions inside Iran and an American war against Islam as a whole. Every actor in this string of conflicts is striving to take up positions in Basra to influence the course of events. Iran is supporting the Islamist parties with which it has enjoyed longstanding ties, whereas the U.S. is supporting local and regional forces that are capable of challenging Iran's influence. And so on.⁴⁹

In such a tense and polarised atmosphere, rumours of military conflict that would engulf Basra are rampant. In mid-2006, reports spread that British forces were gathering at the Iranian border in anticipation of a large operation.⁵⁰ The March 2007 crisis triggered by Iran's capture of British sailors generated similar fears.⁵¹

Leading local political actors routinely invoke the threat of outside interference to justify their behaviour or evade responsibility for their failures. When in 2006 most Sunnis were forcibly expelled from the city as part of the massive sectarian cleansing that followed the Samarra shrine bombing,⁵² they were accused of being "infiltrated" by Saudi Wahhabis.⁵³ Whichever party happens to control the governorate is inclined to blame insecurity and inadequate services on foreign sabotage. A governorate official explained that neighbouring countries fuel instability and disorder in order to promote cross-border trafficking, undermine Iraq's economy and ensure that Basra as well as the country as a whole continue to rely

⁴⁵ For an analysis on how this bill affects the struggle over competing federal schemes, see for example Reider Visser, "Basra, the Reluctant Seat of Shiastan", op. cit.

⁴⁶ Fadhila allied with Iyad Allawi's secular Iraqi National Accord and Hizbollah, a small Islamist group based in the southern marshlands. SCIRI forged an alliance, known as *al-Bayt al-Khumasi*, which comprises the Badr organisation (SCIRI's militia), the Sayid al-Shuhada movement (a small Islamist movement), Tha'r Allah and Mu'assasat Shahid al-Mahrab (an organisation belonging to SCIRI). Despite their tense relations, the Sadrists and SCIRI are informally allied against Fadhila.

⁴⁷ "In response, Fadhila called upon other armed groups in nearby governorates to support the governor, who has become the party's key asset. Its leader, Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, stated that any effort to undermine the governor would be seen as an attack against Fadhila as a whole. Indeed, all their interests are now vested in the governor. The relationship between SCIRI and the Sadrists is not getting any better but both are determined to fight Fadhila". Crisis Group interview, SCIRI militant, Basra, May 2007.

⁴⁸ Knights and Williams, op. cit., p. 23.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, leader of Tha'r Allah, Basra, March 2007.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Sadrists, Basra, August 2006.

⁵¹ See *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 28 March 2007.

⁵² See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, militiamen involved in sectarian violence, Basra, August 2006. Wahhabism is a strand of Sunni Islam which adheres to the most literalist reading of scripture, allowing very little scope for rational deliberation or interpretation and viewed by many Shiites as equivalent to the al-Qaeda type of Salafism. Crisis Group Report, *Understanding Islamism*, op. cit., p. 10.

on imported goods.⁵⁴ British forces themselves frequently are accused of fuelling violence. A senior Fadhila official said:

Iran and others are turning Iraq, and particularly Basra, into the arena for their disputes. Although the governor always is at the centre of the local struggle, he should not be blamed for disorder or corruption. The negative influence of regional countries is the true reason behind the failure of local government to develop Basra and provide basic services.⁵⁵

Local actors allege foreign involvement to disparage and discredit local opponents. The most common charge is that of being an Iranian agent – an accusation all sides cavalierly hurl at one another. Tha’r Allah denounces SCIRI and Fadhila as instruments of Iranian influence. “The Iranians are not crazy or naïve enough to send their own secret service agents, nor do they have to: thanks to the parties that used to be exiled in Iran and those that currently dominate the local government, they already have Iraqi accomplices on the ground”.⁵⁶ In like manner, its rivals harshly criticise Tha’r Allah for its supposed ties to Iranian intelligence which, according to Fadhila, helped it carry out an assassination attempt against the governor.⁵⁷

More broadly, and even though other countries are viewed suspiciously, Iran has become the focal point of accusations of external meddling. Locals tend to assume the omnipresence of Iranian intelligence throughout the city. A local official commented: “Iran’s intervention in Basra is far more powerful than Kuwait’s, to take one example. Kuwait’s involvement is essentially economic in nature, whereas Iran clearly is pursuing political objectives”.⁵⁸ In the words of a university professor,

“Iranian intelligence has established a presence in the Iranian consulate, humanitarian associations, businesses and pro-Iranian political parties”.⁵⁹ Roughly similar views are shared by British officials:

Iran uses a number of channels, both overt and covert. It overtly runs trading companies, supports pilgrims and is involved in legitimate political dialogue with several political parties, chiefly those such as SCIRI that resisted Saddam’s regime with Iranian assistance. Iran’s policy essentially is to seek the emergence of an Iraq with which it can do business, that is non-threatening and where fellow Shiites can live without fear of repression. Iran also fears any foreign – and, specifically U.S. or UK – military presence on its borders. In this respect, Tehran’s security and intelligence officers have been providing various militants seeking to force our departure with covert technical support – including weapons and sophisticated improvised explosive devices.

How much Tehran’s influence has grown is very hard to measure, given that many Iraqi Shiites remain suspicious of Iran. At the same time, Iraqis are often pragmatic and are willing to accept Iranian support if it serves their interests. For that reason, most parties still do business with Iran, because it would be foolish for them to alienate their most powerful neighbour. In a similar vein, while many militants who attack coalition forces label themselves nationalists, they are happy to accept Iranian support to achieve their most immediate goal, the eviction of the multinational force. The true measure of Iran’s influence will be apparent as coalition forces draw down, reducing the need for Shiite tactical cooperation with Tehran.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ “Countries such as Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are infiltrating intelligence agents into the city. The deteriorating situation in Basra opens up our market to their goods. Iraq as a whole spends huge amounts on imports from these countries. That’s why they are seeking to prolong chaos as long as possible”. Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, March 2007.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Fadhila official, Basra, March 2007.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Tha’r Allah official, Basra, March 2007.

⁵⁷ “The Major Crimes Unit [an elite police unit] has been penetrated both by Iranians and by Tha’r Allah members. As he himself has claimed, the governor escaped an assassination attempt organised by that unit”. Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, January 2007.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, port authority official, Basra, August 2006. A British official concurred: “It is far more difficult for the other Gulf states to have influence in the south, as many Shiites see them as Sunni-dominated supporters of the former

regime. Some, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, are involved in border security issues and local business deals and are seeking contact with local tribes but, as they are mainly concerned with what they perceive as growing Shiite (and therefore in their eyes Iranian) influence, they have focused their efforts on establishing relations with the central government and on trying to influence Sunnis further north”. Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, London, February 2007. “The Arab Gulf states do not have a southern sphere of influence to speak of and are doing very little to build one. Their rhetoric and behaviour, echoed by those of countries such as Egypt, amounts to saying they are unhappy with the Iraqi government’s treatment of the Sunni population. But we are still a long way from the Gulf monarchies actively assisting Iraq’s Sunnis”. Crisis Group interview, British official, London, February 2007.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, student, Basra, January 2007.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, London, February 2007. Other British officials echo this view: “Iran’s primary objective is to ensure that the U.S. and UK suffer and

In Basra, more accounts (typically unsubstantiated) abound. For some, Tehran's ambitious and ruthless strategy is to empty the south of its minority populations in order to promote SCIRI's goal of establishing and ruling a vast Shiite southern region.⁶¹ This vision of a highly Machiavellian Iran builds on deep and enduring wariness toward their neighbour, rooted in the Iran-Iraq war and older tensions between the Arab and Persian worlds.

II. OIL, MILITIAS AND THE SCRAMBLE FOR RESOURCES

Although they are significant, the above factors – foreign meddling, tensions between the city and Baghdad, and Basra's diversity – do not explain most of the violence. Rumours notwithstanding, there is little hard proof concerning the extent of outside interference. While Crisis Group heard credible testimony of Iranian involvement, its goal appears for the most part to be to promote attacks against coalition troops rather than to fuel local, internecine violence.⁶² Most of the evidence involves support for operations targeting British forces, although even then local militants are forced to rely on their own resources as well. A Mahdi Army fighter said:

The border between Iraq and Iran is hundreds of kilometres long. The British are not in a position to block all Iranian support. The other day, we received Katyusha missiles from Iran, and this allowed us to shoot down a helicopter. But do you think Iran is the only source of weapons for the Mahdi Army? Of course not! We have to count on others. For example an Iraqi general whose help we requested turned us down, but – to avoid any retaliation – he told us about an area full of mines that had been left behind after the Iran-Iraq war. Such local resources remain indispensable to the Mahdi Army.⁶³

Generally speaking, and although there is strong suspicion of pervasive outside interference, inhabitants of Basra acknowledge that their accusations against Iran stem from rumour and logical deduction more than from fact. "It's true that Basra is a border city, adjacent to Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and we always hear about foreign – particularly Iranian – interference. But we don't have any hard evidence".⁶⁴ Tehran's influence in the south clearly exceeds that of any other outside player, though it appears to be exercised principally through local actors who are engaged in domestic power struggles and pursuing their own parochial interests – often seemingly trivial, and sometimes at odds with their foreign backers' strategic goals.

Iraq could be on the moon, and Iraqis would still kill each other. Overestimation of the foreign

leave. With regard to Iraqis, Iran is trying to build or maintain good relations with anyone who is likely to matter, Sadrists included. They are backing every horse in the race. All armed groups are now accepting Iranian money, assets and training. The Sadrists themselves have toned down their anti-Iranian rhetoric and are taking Iranian money, even though Tehran still enjoys closer ties to SCIRI. At the same time, Iranian aid is going to charity groups, including Islamic ones, and, particularly in the south they are investing in economic activity". Crisis Group interview, February 2007. On the issue of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), some sources claim to be in possession of incontrovertible evidence. Cf. Knights and Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-28.

⁶¹ "Parties that used to live in exile in Iran insist on their sectarian version of federalism. In my view, this federalism is a smokescreen behind which lies the goal of dividing Iraq into three parts – Shiite, Sunni and Kurd. Sunnis, Mandaeans and Christians were forced out of Basra. Iran has used its allies to expel minorities and pave the way for its brand of federalism for the region". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, January 2007.

⁶² According to a Sunni imam, Iran did not have a hand in the most brutal inter-confessional violence that led Sunnis to flee the city. "Iran has religious and strategic interests in Iraq. But I don't think it has an interest in promoting chaos". Crisis Group interview, Basra, August 2006.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Basra, August 2006.

influence over Iraq is evident in consideration of Iranian influence in Iraq's Shia community...The Shia are fighting their own civil war, with local factions fighting for local reasons. Outsiders meddle but they are peripheral to the main conflict between the factions. Though Tehran may have advantages over the Coalition in its struggle to influence Iraqis – longer engagement with Iraq's Shia and greater insight into the local culture – the Iranians, like all foreigners, swim in the same confusing sea of local factions. For them, as for anyone else, influence can only be rented, never bought.⁶⁵

Likewise, the controversy over federalism and relations with Baghdad, though frequently at the centre of debate, does not account for much of the tension and daily violence. Mostly, it has been cynically manipulated by local and national politicians; average citizens, disappointed by their leaders, seem to have lost interest. With the rise of Islamist parties, the more cosmopolitan, secular and moderate Basra citizens worried as early as 2005 that federalism might mean domination by conservative, backward-looking local government. A chamber of commerce member said: "I don't want to have Basra separated from the central government because I am afraid that religious parties will enjoy a free hand and impose their rule".⁶⁶ In the eyes of some, Baghdad became an indispensable safeguard and counterweight.⁶⁷ Since then, pervasive violence, extensive corruption and local mismanagement have further discredited a federal agenda many initially had embraced. Politicians fight over it, no longer because it reflects popular sentiment, but because – with Iraq's progressive break-up into fiefdoms – federalism has become a stake in a wider struggle for control.

Basra's diversity, potentially a source of tension, largely has been mitigated by the steady rise of armed Islamist parties. The city's tradition of open-mindedness and tolerance for the most part has vanished and prominent trading families have departed. Most non-Muslim minorities have been forced either to migrate or lie low, basically disappearing from the social scene.⁶⁸ Even the

Sunni presence essentially has become a thing of the past, thereby reducing the potential for sectarian violence. A British officer pointed out in February 2007:

Many Sunni families in the south have fled north to Baghdad and Mosul. The fact that the ratio of Sunni to Shiite is low, and diminishing, means that sectarian violence is now less common than further north. Sunnis cannot afford to be aggressive and so there is less of a cycle of sectarian violence.⁶⁹

Tribes by and large have been absorbed by Islamist parties. Some were recruited into armed militias,⁷⁰ others were forcefully subdued, notably through the systematic assassination of tribal sheikhs. A Mahdi Army fighter said:

The Garamsha tribe is finished. It's true that they were a group of thugs and thieves, but their era is now gone. Why? Because today Basra is wholly politicised. Everyone must join a political party. No one can remain independent. You have to belong to a party to enjoy its support and protection from others.⁷¹

The Shaykhiya Shiite minority, which also was the target of brutal attacks, strived to remain neutral but was compelled to establish its own militia while simultaneously joining a non-aggression pact with the main parties.⁷²

Christians to practice their religious rituals. Some Mandaean remain in Basra but their numbers are negligible. The Islamic parties' militias argue that Allah prohibits any religion other than Islam. Our religious leaders instill our people with backward thoughts". Crisis Group email communication, Basra-born medical doctor, May 2007.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, defence ministry official, London, February 2007. That said, two Sunni mosques were blown up on 15 June 2007 in retaliation for the earlier destruction of the minarets of the Askari shrine in Samarra.

⁷⁰ "In Basra, the tribes had started to steal, kill and kidnap for their own benefit. But the politicians have since found a way to turn them into their foot soldiers. Much of the militia membership has been recruited from their ranks". Crisis Group email communication, Basra-born medical doctor, May 2007.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006. The chief of the Garamsha, Hasan Jarih al-Garamshi, was murdered in May 2006. *Al-Zaman* [Iraqi daily], 15 May 2006.

⁷² "After the fall of Saddam's regime, the Shaykhiya tried to steer clear of political conflicts and tit-for-tat violence. But some people bombed their mosque and threatened to kick them out of Basra on the ground that they were of Saudi origin. The Shaykhiya then armed themselves but they also asked all Basra political parties to sign a pact that would allow them to live in peace. This was done at the 'al-Zahra conference' in April 2006, which involved all of Basra's key players". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006. "As a matter of principle, the Shaykhiya chose to stay away from

⁶⁵ Knights and Williams, op. cit., p. 37.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, member of Basra's chamber of commerce, Basra, March 2005.

⁶⁷ "We will always need some supervision from Baghdad. If the governor wants to fire someone, for instance, he will have to go back to Baghdad. Baghdad should keep an eye on local decisions. And the national parliament should act as a kind of watchdog". Crisis Group interview, tribal chief, Basra, March 2005.

⁶⁸ "One could say that Armenians and Chaldaeans have altogether disappeared from Basra. As far as I know, all churches are now closed. It is difficult, not to say impossible, for

The end result has been monopoly control by a variety of armed Islamist parties over Basra politics. In the occupation's early stages, they focused attacks on former regime members, such as Baathists and military officers. Over time, their target list extended to anyone potentially threatening their political or economic interests, be they Sunni or Shiite, doctors, engineers, journalists, tribal chiefs or independent traffickers. Engaged in a brutal scramble for resources and a vicious cycle of attack and counter-attack, militias have become by far Basra's principal source of violence. This could well foreshadow what will happen to the rest of the country once other causes of strife – mainly, the fight against coalition forces and sectarian violence – recede.

A. SUBVERTING THE STATE

Basra's political transition gave parties a dominant role in the emerging order without simultaneously compelling them to honour the rule of law that was supposed to be at the core of that order. As a result, groupings that could acquire resources did so with impunity, acting more as criminal gangs than political parties and using the electoral process to participate in a system whose founding principles they wilfully ignored. Once in power, they neither sought to build social bases nor were able to govern effectively; indeed, their thorough mismanagement cost them significant public support. A university professor remarked: "Although public services are deteriorating by the day, local officials are always telling people that they are busy with vital issues such as insecurity, described as the cause for the absence of reconstruction. But the people believe they are solely concerned with their own

politics. After the 2003 war, they kept their distance from all political parties and preferred to remain isolated. But, by threatening them, the parties forced them to get involved. That is when the Shaykhiya brought the parties together in a committee and informally discussed security issues, in the process protecting both their neutrality and their safety. The committee, which came out of the 'al-Zahra conference', was called Basra's Deliberative Council and meets once a month". Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006. Designed to maintain the Shaykhiya's neutrality and safety, the committee also regulated relations between local political actors. The Zahra agreement now appears to be in jeopardy due to the intensifying conflict between Fadhlila and other Islamist parties: "The situation was relatively calm in Basra but things are deteriorating rapidly. There used to be an agreement or modus vivendi between the militias, tribes and other actors but the rules have been broken. Now we have this huge demonstration against the governor and occasional armed clashes, which threaten to get out of hand". Crisis Group interview, local journalist, Basra, June 2007.

interests".⁷³ Yet, by contributing to a dynamic of violence, they heightened their value as actors who could provide protection and exact revenge.

Despite their names and their Islamist posture, the dominant parties have not put forward a genuine program or political agenda aside from the imposition of conservative mores. It is far from clear whether the bulk of their membership vows allegiance to any major Shiite religious figure. "The Islamist parties do not follow the clerics' orders. In other words, no cleric can really influence the Islamist parties if his rulings were to go against their interests".⁷⁴ Even figures as powerful as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani do not carry much weight where local interests are at stake.⁷⁵ As described above, tensions even have arisen between the national leaderships of various parties and Basra-based representatives pursuing their own parochial concerns.

As a result, local institutions are ruled by a myriad of factions intent on promoting their immediate interests. The new political elite were propelled virtually overnight into positions of responsibility for which they generally were unqualified. Some of their more prominent members are rumoured to have been little more than successful oil smugglers during Saddam Hussein's regime.⁷⁶ Today, the most significant criterion for personnel nominations and promotions is factional loyalty.

The core of the problem in Basra is its incompetent administration and weak military leadership. As police chief, the governor chose an officer from the former Iraqi army, specialised in radars, not because he is capable of leading the police force but for personal reasons. Thus we have a police chief lacking experience and character.⁷⁷

The local power apparatus is fragmented into myriad, partisan fiefdoms. Fadhlila, which controls the Oil Protection Force – the unit responsible for safeguarding wells, refineries and pipelines – essentially is in charge of the oil infrastructure. The small Hizbollah party has a

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, university professor, Basra, March 2007.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, March 2007.

⁷⁵ "Not every Islamist party follows the authority of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the other ayatollahs in Najaf, because the parties are pursuing different strategies and agendas". Crisis Group interview, Tha'r Allah leader, Basra, March 2007.

⁷⁶ The governor has become a convenient target for unsubstantiated accusations of trafficking and ties to criminal activity. Crisis Group interview, local government employee, Basra, August 2006.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior governorate official, Basra, March 2007.

strong presence in the Customs Police Force. For some time now, SCIRI has been most influential in the intelligence service. The Sadrist current dominates a large segment of the local police force,⁷⁸ together with the Facilities Protection Service – supposedly in charge of protecting governorate infrastructure – and the port authority. The ports themselves are under the sway of competing actors.⁷⁹ This allocation of responsibility is fluid and the object of intense rivalry.⁸⁰

Parties fight most intensely over the three most valuable assets: oil trafficking, control over security forces and access to public services and resources. Evidence suggests that local parties are massively involved in oil trafficking.⁸¹ This is openly acknowledged by some, including a Mahdi Army fighter: “All parties, without exception, steal and smuggle oil. I mean all of them – and that includes the Sadrist current. It’s true that I belong to that current, but I am being frank and honest”.⁸² Another said: “When Moqtada al-Sadr met with representatives of his current in Basra, he scratched his nose and said, mockingly, ‘I smell the smell of gasoline’. That was his way of accusing his own representatives of smuggling oil”.⁸³

Smuggling takes different shapes. Some have accused Fadhila, which has strived to control the Southern Oil Company,⁸⁴ of siphoning off diesel at its source,

embezzling what it is supposed to monitor. Others are said to drill holes into pipelines. “Smugglers drive a hole in the pipeline, attach a faucet and then load up their trucks. The diesel oil is taken to the port of Abu Flus and then sold. Trafficking in Basra has given rise to a gigantic and highly sophisticated mafia, comprising smugglers, middlemen, accomplices within the oil ministry and so forth”.⁸⁵ Some tribes play a pivotal role as go-betweens. A well-informed journalist said:

Basra’s tribal sheikhs are not reliable partners in the fight against smugglers. Most show little appetite for supporting security forces when they clash with traffickers. Instead, they tend to help the latter. Ordinarily, they will put their farms and boats at the smugglers’ disposal. Those that do not get involved in smuggling just tend to keep out of the business to avoid being targeted.⁸⁶

Many observers point to widespread cooperation between traffickers and officials.⁸⁷ Infiltration of the security apparatus was greatly facilitated by a British hiring policy that appears to have given precedence to quantity over quality. New recruits were drawn by the prospect of a salary (which sometimes amounted to a second one),⁸⁸ government-paid weapons and political cover which gave them impunity.⁸⁹ A security official remarked:

⁷⁸ “Most of the police operating in Basra are suspected of having ties to the Sadrists”. Crisis Group interview, senior officer involved in city’s security plan, Basra, March 2007.

⁷⁹ “Basra has three ports. Abu Flus is controlled by the al-Ashur tribe; al-Khur is held by SCIRI; Umm Qasr is dominated by Fadhila”. Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006. Umm Qasr, by far the largest of the three, is the locus of all kinds of trafficking, notably of imported car duties. Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, January 2007.

⁸⁰ Thus, when the governor belonged to SCIRI, it controlled the Southern Oil Company, and its spokesperson was a former Badr Corps fighter. Crisis Group interviews, Southern Oil Company, Basra, March 2005.

⁸¹ “Alongside politics, Basra witnessed increased levels of mafia-style killings related to control of extremely lucrative oil smuggling rackets, which increasingly involved all the key political factions operating in Basra. With literally billions of dollars worth of oil bypassing the national oil export system into the domestic and external black markets, Basra had become financially indispensable to Iraq’s Shiite militias”. Knights and Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Basra, August 2006.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006.

⁸⁴ Several observers assert that Fadhila has resorted to murder to accomplish this goal. “In order to control Basra’s oil institutions, Fadhila killed high-level officials and stacked important positions with its loyalists”. Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006. Of late, the Southern Oil Company has shown growing signs of independence from

Fadhila and the governor. “Over the past few months, the company’s director has competed with the governor and asserted himself on the local political scene. For example, he has funded the refurbishing of roads. This came at the expense of the governor’s popularity, as residents of Basra began to wonder why the governorate hadn’t taken the initiative”. Crisis Group interview, SCIRI militant, Basra, June 2007.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, businessman with ties to traffickers, Basra, August 2006.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, March 2007.

⁸⁷ “The Bayt al-Ashur tribe is like a mafia. One of its members was arrested by the police and then released on orders of Basra’s governor. What does that mean? It means there is an agreement between the traffickers and governor”. Crisis Group interview, smuggler belonging to a rival group, Basra, August 2006. This and other similar claims are generally unsubstantiated and come from suspect sources – in this instance, one of the tribe’s competitors. “The Facilities Protection Unit is there, the police are there, and yet a *modus vivendi* exists between the various parties. At night, trucks unload the oil into boats which is then sold in Iran or in the Gulf states”. Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army member, Basra, August 2006.

⁸⁸ Badr Corps members reportedly also are paid by the militia.

⁸⁹ “Provision of jobs allowed militia leaders to demonstrate largesse to their followers and simultaneously utilise federal revenues to pay them. In no time at all, security forces were 0 per cent trained, 0 per cent equipped, 165 per cent manned, and 100 per cent paid. Other expedient measures included what one British general termed the ‘pragmatic use of militias.’ Despite the June 2004 CPA directive outlawing militias, both the local

Some of the crimes committed by members of the security forces result directly from the police recruitment procedures. In fact, there were no rules for vetting applicants, but only one condition: those who apply to join the military or the police should not be members of the former intelligence, Fidayin Saddam [an elite paramilitary formation under Saddam Hussein] or Baath Party.⁹⁰

Implications of this lax recruitment policy are still felt, notwithstanding official British and Iraqi commitment to end it.⁹¹ The governor still places loyalists in key positions. More broadly, in the words of a party leader:

The security forces are entirely politicised. Each party has taken its share of jobs in these institutions. Most have gone to Fadhila. When Fadhila took control of the governorate, it seized the opportunity to name its members to important positions. Alas, all of the more sensitive posts have been filled on the basis not of competence but of membership in an Islamist party.⁹²

Ironically, coalition efforts to eliminate militias have accelerated their penetration of the police and army. A governorate official explained: "After December 2006, when the U.S. began focusing on this file and pressuring the prime minister to disarm the militias, the militias stepped up their efforts to merge with the security forces".⁹³ The end result has been a war between gangs backed by the branches of various local security forces:

Most of the Shiite parties in the south have been involved in violence of some kind, including Fadhila (the governor's party). This has included Fadhila members in the Iraqi police engaged in extra-judicial killings and criminal activity. In terms of the governor himself, he has feuded with local tribal and political leaders on a number of occasions, leading to clashes between Fadhila supporters in the police and these other factions (especially an ongoing feud with the Tha'r Allah political party/militia).⁹⁴

Murders committed by individuals dressed in security force uniforms became rampant in 2006, when assassinations peaked and are now routine – a fact that explains the forces' appalling reputation and highlights their impunity.⁹⁵ According to a militia leader, "80 per cent of assassinations in 2006 were committed by individuals wearing police uniforms, carrying police guns and using police cars".⁹⁶ No party takes responsibility for the violence.

Political parties also draw on public funds tied to the non-oil sector. According to a local analyst:

Most projects and contracts meant to develop the city are misappropriated by parties in charge of key posts in Basra's local government. They use them to develop their internal party structures and patronage networks. Officials routinely hand contracts out to relatives, followers or people

government and [the coalition] continued to pay stipends to key tribes north of Basra in barely concealed protection rackets". Knights and Williams, op. cit., p. 25. In many ways, this practice mirrors that of the former regime, which, for example, used to pay the Battat tribe to protect local oil fields.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, official in charge of Basra's security plan, Basra, March 2007.

⁹¹ During a 31 May 2006 visit to Basra, Prime Minister al-Maliki ordered a state of emergency, asserting: "We will not let Basra keep bleeding with the existence of these gangs. Security is first, security is second and security is third. Security forces should not be subjected to harassment or pressure from political forces. These things must be absolutely impermissible. The security officer, the soldier and the policeman must not be afraid or confused because of political interference". Quoted by Knights and Williams, who also provide details of the security plan, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, leader of a rival party to Fadhila, Basra, January 2007. "Everyone is trying to control the security services by stacking the most important positions with his allies. Fadhila basically created the Oil Protection Force. Most of its employees, obviously, are members of the party. Before, the security services were mainly headed by SCIRI". Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, January 2007.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, March 2007.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

⁹⁵ For a description of how, beginning in mid-2004, British forces allowed special units to operate despite being thoroughly infiltrated by the Badr Corps, Fadhila, Tha'r Allah and the Mahdi Army, see Knights and Williams, op. cit., pp. 29-30.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior leader of the Tha'r Allah militia, Basra, August 2006. An account of a 2006 clash between Tha'r Allah and Fadhila illustrates how security forces are perceived to be manipulated by parties seeking to maximise their power: "In order to justify an attack against the mosque that serves as Tha'r Allah's headquarters, the governor spread rumours according to which cars used to commit crimes had been seen near the mosque. The governor ordered the army and the police to launch an offensive against the mosque. The two generals in charge of the army and police, neither of whom belongs to Fadhila, refused and subsequently were punished. The governor then signed a new order in which he assumed entire responsibility for the operation. This time, the army obeyed. During the offensive, the sister of Tha'r Allah's leader was killed, along with other family members. The fight became personal. Since then, mediation efforts have failed. Tha'r Allah joined forces with the Bani Asad tribe once it attacked the governorate in retaliation for [the] assassination". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006. Other accounts differ; according to some, SCIRI assassinated the Bani Asad leader.

willing to pay kickbacks. Such large contracts consume a substantial part of the budget and, for the most part, yield very little.⁹⁷

Although the governor receives much of the blame, from both local and foreign observers,⁹⁸ the problem almost certainly is far more widespread.⁹⁹

All in all, efforts by political parties to subvert the state have resulted in its break-up into myriad component parts, none of which can implement an effective public policy. "The main problem that results is a lack of institutional capacity, which means it is difficult to effect change in the province as a whole. Rather than cooperate, parties and tribes look after their own constituencies".¹⁰⁰

B. CIRCUMVENTING THE STATE

The political process was supposed to produce governing institutions capable of reining in the militias; instead, the militias at best ignore, quite often rob and at times confront those very institutions. Almost as soon as the former regime was toppled, Islamist parties took over police functions and extended their authority. A high-level Sadrist official asserted:

Some people think that taking part in elections is the only way of being active. But, without even having to participate, we are present throughout Basra's administration. From those positions, we directly combat disorder and depravity. We do this by guiding people, by explaining religious concepts. We also fight drug dealers and alcohol retailers by destroying their stocks, warning, arresting, and ultimately handing them over to the police. Do we think violence is the only way? Yes. People cannot just do whatever they want. A person

in his home has the right to be free, free to choose his clothing, his movements, his way of sleeping, eating, talking and so forth. But as soon as he receives a guest, he must behave differently as a sign of respect. When he leaves his home, naturally, his freedom becomes even more circumscribed.¹⁰¹

The militias' actions do not merely reflect a conservative moral agenda. They also aim to make up for the state's perceived inability to protect the community from the terrorist attacks that hit Basra in 2006. According to an observer:

After a bomb went off in a marketplace, one of the militias murdered Dr Yusif al-Hasan, a Sunni religious scholar who was accused of financing such operations. Had he been arrested, legal procedures would have dragged on before he even appeared before a judge. Militias would rather kill the terrorists themselves without even alerting the police – all the more so since laws are not rigorously enforced. All kinds of pressures are brought to bear to release terrorists from prison.¹⁰²

Ironically, the process has become self-reinforcing. The same parties that complain about lack of law enforcement intervene to obtain the release of imprisoned members.¹⁰³ Likewise, they are the first to oppose disciplinary action against security force members if they belong to their organisation. A tribal leader remarked: "If the ministry or the governorate decide to dismiss an officer, he usually will remain in his post if he belongs to a powerful tribe or party".¹⁰⁴

Conversely, competent officers risk discharge if they lack militia support. Overall, this pattern has tended to undermine both the police force and the judiciary. In a British official's words:

The police cannot confront the militias, which are simply too strong. Besides, local leaders are under all kinds of pressure. In order to take forceful action against the militias, one would need leaders who come from outside the city. But if the police chief is from Basra, he simply cannot escape the web of

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, university professor, Basra, March 2007. He added: "Basically, reconstruction projects turn out to be either mere repainting jobs or outright scams. High quality equipment can be imported at great cost and then remain in storage since nobody has the training required to use it".

⁹⁸ See Knights and Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁹⁹ "All those who work in town hall are unqualified. Many presented forged diplomas and most are corrupt. All of Basra's residents know this, but we just don't have hard proof. Officials link up with companies that are then awarded the most lucrative contracts". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, January 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007. "Bogus projects and contracts are used to cover up stolen funds. As a rule of thumb, if the real cost of paving a street in Basra is 35,000,000 dinars [approximately \$30,000], the contract would be evaluated at around 450,000,000 [approximately \$360,000]!" Crisis Group interview, governorate employee, Basra, March 2007.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Sadrist official, Basra, March 2005. "Other parties work just like the Sadrists do. SCIRI, for example, has taken on a policing function. They arrest thieves, people who sell alcohol, etc. Fadhlila armed itself to kill Baathists and terrorists". Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, August 2006.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006.

¹⁰³ "We can't afford to turn over prisoners belonging to the Mahdi Army to the police because they will be freed". Crisis Group interview, British official, Basra, January 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, tribal leader, Basra, August 2006.

tribal, social and political connections that inevitably will determine his behaviour.¹⁰⁵

A governorate official added: "Today, the police fear the citizen, not the other way around. They are afraid he may belong to a powerful party".¹⁰⁶

The inability of local authorities to protect the community greatly reinforces the power and influence of parties and tribes. Merchants and businessmen buy protection by sharing profits with their so-called guardians.¹⁰⁷ Some tribes extort companies doing business in areas under their control.¹⁰⁸ A growing and increasingly violent power struggle in Basra has further eroded what is left of governorate authority. Throughout 2006, political assassinations snowballed into a cycle of lawless revenge killings.¹⁰⁹

Whatever semblance of order exists is above all the result of a balance of power between militias. Security forces act at best as bystanders, at worst as one or another side's accomplice. Informal, unofficial mechanisms also are used to regulate violence. For example, a number of tribes signed a pact relieving them of responsibility for acts of violence committed by a member acting on behalf of a political party. In the words of a tribal chief, "all members of a political party who commit a crime for the sake of that party automatically forfeit their tribe's protection, because their primary allegiance is to a political party".¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, British official, Basra, January 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, governorate official, Basra, January 2007.

¹⁰⁷ "One of the parties' principal sources of funding are large companies. For example, one of the large companies might fear Tha'r Allah and give it what it wants. Merchants also hand over a percentage of their gains to powerful individuals". Crisis Group interview, intellectual, Basra, January 2007.

¹⁰⁸ "We allocate reconstruction projects to Iraqi entrepreneurs but they often are reluctant to accept because they are blackmailed by tribes. Sometimes, tribes insist on receiving half the estimated budget. And so, we try to hire members of the tribe in order to satisfy them and reduce the pressure". Crisis Group interview, official involved in reconstruction sector, Basra, August 2006.

¹⁰⁹ A Basra teacher described one such event, although he provided no solid supporting evidence: "After the murder of the head of the Sa'id tribe, Fadhila spread the rumour that SCIRI was responsible. The tribe immediately burned down SCIRI's headquarters. But the son of the murdered chief, who survived the attack, recognised the culprit, a member of the Mansur tribe. The Sa'id tribe arrested him and videotaped his interrogation, in which he admitted he was working for Fadhila and for the governor. The Sa'id hung him from a tree and then put him on fire, in front of everyone". Crisis Group interview, teacher, Basra, August 2006.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, tribal chief, Basra, August 2006. "Listen to this story: after killing a Baathist, a Sadrist was ordered

More broadly, extra-institutional forums have become privileged arenas of conflict resolution, further undermining official institutions, most notably the judiciary. A journalist remarked:

In Basra, the best way to resolve or mitigate problems growing out of increased insecurity is to organise meetings between party chiefs, religious leaders and tribal figures. Some people say that this kind of gathering undermines the government's work by marginalising it. Others think that they at least have the merit of reducing armed conflict. I agree with the former, because these meetings occur at the expense of any legality or legitimacy.¹¹¹

Such informal agreements have a dual impact: they reduce the ferocity of violence and render it tolerable, regulating its intensity so that it falls within acceptable bounds. They thus enable the perpetuation of mafia-rule, simultaneously undercutting governorate authority and ensuring that militia-on-militia fighting does not become self-destructive. A British officer said: "Basra is in a state of fragile stability – government and central organs of authority can operate, but as part of a framework which includes religious, tribal and party forces. As these relationships lose their balance, violence breaks out, until balance is restored, usually through truces or external intervention".¹¹²

Meanwhile, alongside such regulated violence, the brutal political struggle goes on. Parties perpetually shift alliances based on ever-changing interests and calculations. Once locked in a bitter struggle with British forces, Fadhila forged a closer relationship with them during the second half of 2006.¹¹³ Such marriages of convenience, which at times can bring together actors at war in other parts of the country, rarely last very long.

Behind a democratic facade, the emerging system is capable of perpetually generating violence. Today, many parties are calling impatiently for local elections (even as they do very little at the national level to make this happen)

by the victim's tribe to pay some form of compensation [*fasl*], as is common under tribal law. The Sadrist was forced to sell his house to pay the 30 million dinars [approximately \$24,000] that was being asked because he did not enjoy his tribe's support". Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, August 2006.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

¹¹³ "In recent months, the governor has been increasingly cooperative with the British – probably because the British saved his life in August". Crisis Group interview, British official, January 2007.

in the hope of defeating Fadhila.¹¹⁴ Many Basra residents harbour the same hope.¹¹⁵ Yet, while new elections may well reshuffle the political deck, it is about all they will do. The same set of actors will remain and any political transition within the existing framework almost certainly will not end their violent conflict. Besides, given the role of armed militias, elections are unlikely to be fully free and fair and to produce a genuine political alternative. The withdrawal of British troops will not help. Ominously, two tribal leaders told Crisis Group they would kill the current governor as soon as coalition forces stopped protecting him.¹¹⁶

The most plausible scenario would be for SCII and the Sadrists to join forces to defeat Fadhila before once more turning against each other. Smaller militias such as Tha'r Allah or Hizbullah would then align themselves with one or the other. While one of the two ultimately may prevail – a function of local and external support – its dominance would be unlikely to remain uncontested, guaranteeing a prolonged and localised form of insurgency.

III. OPERATION SINBAD

Between September 2006 and March 2007, British forces carried out Operation Sinbad which they presented as a response to the militia problem. Among the principal objectives was to fight militia infiltration of security services, improve police performance and reduce fratricidal violence. At first glance, results appeared somewhat promising. Although he conceded that “a sustained improvement will require a much improved police force”, a British defence official claimed: “Factional and political in-fighting had their spikes throughout 2005 and 2006. Criminality, especially the murder rate, which had been rising, has dipped to some extent as a consequence of recent operations”.¹¹⁷

At closer look, the picture is less encouraging. Some British data defies credibility. The claim that approximately 90 per cent of the city's and governorate's police stations have reached a “satisfactory” level,¹¹⁸ for example, is belied by testimony from first-hand witnesses. Most underscore the vast gap separating the army – whose performance is assessed as decent albeit imperfect – from the police, judged to be wholly inadequate. In early 2007, a British official acknowledged: “The Iraqi army has been involved in Sinbad and been given moderate tasks, which it has done satisfactorily. The police are a problem throughout the country. Work is still ongoing on police reform but they are not at a stage where they can be tasked to perform any role”.¹¹⁹ During the operation's waning days, an Iraqi officer directly involved in implementing the security plan evoked the “weakness of

¹¹⁴ Sadrists and members of the Badr Corps are allied against Fadhila in Basra even though they are bitter enemies in Baghdad and elsewhere. “Following the principle ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’, SCIRI and its allies have become close to the Sadrists. In other words, Sadrists and SCIRI are united in their goal of beating Fadhila at the polls in Basra. In fact, many conspiracies are being hatched to get rid of Fadhila”. Crisis Group interview, journalist, Basra, January 2007. In March 2007, both SCIRI and Tha'r Allah were calling for swift local elections. Crisis Group interviews, high-level officials of both parties, Basra, March 2007.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Basra residents, Basra, August 2006.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, tribal chiefs, Basra, August 2006.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

¹¹⁸ “As a result of Operation Sinbad, 92 per cent of police stations within Basra city are now assessed at a satisfactory standard (up from 9 per cent in September) whilst in the wider province of Basra, nearly 92 per cent of stations are now up to standard (up from 38 per cent in September)”. British Ministry of Defence, “Coalition Military Presence in Iraq”, available at www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/OperationsFactsheets/OperationsInIraqKeyFactsFigures.htm.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, British official, January 2007. “The Iraqi army has generally demonstrated superior capabilities than the police, although I would still argue it lacks heavy firepower that would give it a decisive edge against militias and tribes. The quality of the police has improved but its loyalties remain split. Many police still owe their loyalty to political parties and tribes, and there are still elements involved in criminal and sectarian activities. This is a longer term problem and reflects the wider nature of Iraqi society, where family, tribe, political and religious ties still supersede relatively new central institutions of authority”. Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

the police and the obvious lack of confidence between police forces and citizens”.¹²⁰ Most importantly, the militias lost little or nothing of their authority. According to a British defence official:

Militia activity varies. Recent operations may have forced them to keep their heads down, but they are still there and likely to remain part of the fabric of daily life for some time because of their entrenchment within Iraqi society. Public perceptions vary. The militias do not enjoy universal support but they still operate with a degree of public tolerance because of their social welfare activities, mistrust of official security forces and the simple power of numbers.¹²¹

British officials confess not to know how to tackle the problem Operation Sinbad was supposed to resolve. Sinbad was conceived as a last-ditch effort prior to a troop drawdown and, as far as one can tell, no serious thought was ever given to an alternative plan in the event of failure. A British official noted during the operation’s final stages: “I don’t think there is much of a Plan B should Sinbad not succeed as we hope”.¹²² Instead, responsibility for coming up with an answer apparently has been delegated to Iraqis, most of whom depend on armed groups for their survival. In a British defence official’s words, “reducing the importance of militias is now more of a question for the Iraqis, depending on how they choose to implement legislation such as CPA Order 91 [a 2003 U.S. decree that established a mechanism for disbanding militias but was never implemented] or conduct other disarmament or integration programs”.¹²³ More realistically, another British official remarked:

Badr and the Mahdi Army are the largest militias and a clash between the two presents the greatest threat of destabilising Basra. That said, both are weary of precipitating a conflict that could spiral out of control. Badr is rebranding itself [as a non-military organisation] and concentrating on placing its members in the security forces. Most of the attacks targeting coalition forces are

conducted by “rogue” Mahdi Army members and smaller militias operating outside the reach of central control. Criminal activity conducted by these and other militias (such as Tha’r Allah) poses a greater threat to stability but, again, there are internal mechanisms at work that generally balance out the various forces. The result is very messy, but generally it works.

Essentially, the key problems are caused by inter-Iraqi competition, which is something only they can solve. We are unlikely to see central security forces strong enough to completely dominate the ground in the near future, so Iraqi compromise and deal-making will be the best way forward, something that is already happening.¹²⁴

Of course, it is just such a situation that gives rise to massive corruption and undermines any semblance of state authority. Despite the long list of projects that have been carried out pursuant to Sinbad,¹²⁵ their tangible impact appears negligible. There is wide-scale diversion of funds and the work performed often is shoddy. The balance sheet is all the more disappointing given how much Basra residents need after years of war and central government neglect.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Iraqi official, Basra, March 2007.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, British official, January 2007.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007. Help certainly will not come from central authorities. “Though such militias and their allied politicians will violently compete at the local level, they also will periodically close ranks whenever foreign or national interlopers seek to reestablish some degree of control over the deep south or restore a modicum of security for the population. In essence, the deep south has become a ‘kleptocracy’ in which well-armed political-criminal Mafiosi have locked both the central government and the people out of power”. Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ See www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/FactSheets/OperationsFactsheets/OperationsInIraqKeyFactsFigures.htm.

¹²⁶ “Basic services remain a problem – money has been invested in civilian infrastructure, but institutional inertia and corruption mean it does not always achieve the desired result. Power generation has increased, but there are major systemic problems caused by years of under-investment (plus there has been an enormous increase in demand), which means that hours of power availability fluctuate. The other problem is that in the absence of security, it is difficult to conduct substantial, long-lasting reconstruction work”. Crisis Group interview, British defence ministry official, London, February 2007.

IV. CONCLUSION

When asked what ought to be done to restore Basra to normalcy, its residents display remarkable and surprising consensus. Above all, they demand that heads of institutions be qualified, competent and, most importantly, unaffiliated with any party. They also demand regulation of party activity and a strengthening of the judiciary – a sector that, up until now, has suffered from extraordinary neglect compared to the police and army.¹²⁷ What they are asking for, in short, is the rule of law.

This aspiration, sound as it may be, is incompatible with the gradual disengagement of British forces from Iraq. In Basra, the British appear to have given up on the idea of establishing a functioning state, capable of equitably redistributing wealth and resources, imposing respect for the rule of law and instituting a genuine and accountable democracy. In any event, time is running out. Four years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, they are facing increasingly frequent and bloody attacks, and it is hard to imagine them remaining for long. Indeed, even were the coalition to re-engage in Basra, it already may well be too late to salvage the situation by creating a functional state. Over time, local government in the south could well resemble a small failed state; the government might collapse, a victim of the ruthless struggle between unregulated and uninhibited militias.

As the U.S. considers plans for Baghdad and other parts of the country, the lessons are clear. First, the answer to Iraq's horrific violence cannot be an illusory military surge that aims to bolster the existing political structure and treats the dominant political parties as partners. Secondly, violence is not solely the result of al-Qaeda-type terrorism or sectarian hostility, however costly both evidently are. Thirdly, as Basra clearly shows, violence has become a routine means of social interaction utilised by political actors doubling as militiamen who seek to increase their share of power and resources.

Basra teaches that as soon as the military surge ends and coalition forces diminish, competition between rival factions itself will surge. In other words, prolonging the same political process with the same political actors will ensure that what is left of the Iraqi state gradually is torn apart. The most likely outcome will be the country's untidy break-up into myriad fiefdoms, superficially held together by the presence of coalition forces. The priority, as Crisis Group outlined in an earlier report, is to confront the power structure established in the wake of the 2003 invasion, as well as the parties that now dominate it, by insisting on

genuine political compromises and a more inclusive system.¹²⁸ It is high time that Washington and London acknowledge that their so-called Iraqi partners, far from building a new state, are tirelessly working to tear it down.

Damascus/Amman/Brussels, 25 June 2007

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Basra, March 2007.

¹²⁸ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°60, *After Baker-Hamilton: What to Do in Iraq*, 19 December 2006.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF IRAQ



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.