

Backgrounder #30

Fact Sheet on Iraqi Security Force Operations 2008: Basra

Andrea R. So, Graduate Student in Security Studies, Georgetown University

Operation Overview

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki launched Operation Sawlat al-Fursan, or Charge of Knights by ordering 15,000 soldiers to Basra.¹ The additional Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) began arriving on March 24th and attacked into the city the next day.² Starting with the Jumhuriyah, Saiza, and Hayaniah neighborhoods, Iraqi leaders planned to execute cordon and search missions and serve arrest warrants “against criminals” in Basra.³ In support of this effort, Iraqi commanders also enhanced ISF operations in Najaf, Hillah, Diwaniyah, and Wasit.⁴

Although Prime Minister Maliki claimed the operation in Basra aimed to rid the city of outlaws, the Iraqi Security Forces mainly targeted members of Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army.⁵ Critics asserted that focusing pressure on the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) posed political risks and threatened security gains. Some stated that by engaging the Mahdi Army and ignoring other Shi’a groups, the Iraqi government signaled its true intentions: to politically isolate Sadr. As one expert observed, “If Maliki had been serious about ending militia rule in Basra, he should also have dealt with the militias of Fadhila and the Badr brigades.”⁶ Furthermore, many concluded that actions in Basra might prompt Sadr to end his cease-fire, an action that could severely destabilize Iraq.⁷

Although Sadr did not lift the cease-fire, he refused disarmament orders and violence erupted in Baghdad, Kut, Diwaniyah, Hillah, Amara, and Nasiriyah.⁸ These hostilities, paired with the ISF’s inability to combat Shiite militias intensified outcries against Operation Charge of the Knights. Many U.S. and Iraqi officials insisted that the mission was badly timed and poorly conceived.⁹ Indeed, many issues arose as the Iraqi army and police engaged Basra’s heavily armed and fortified JAM and rogue JAM fighters.

First, the ISF failed to advance against bold raids conducted by Shiite insurgents that attacked quickly and then retreated to their strongholds throughout Basra.¹⁰ Iraqi officers also

indicated that the militia had “heavier and more sophisticated weapons” than the ISF.¹¹ According to eyewitness reports, Mahdi fighters fired mortars, rocket propelled grenades, automatic weapons, and sniper rifles at seemingly helpless Iraqi army units.”¹² Based on these difficulties, U.S. and British officials had to reinforce the ISF with coalition ground troops, helicopters, and air strikes.¹³

Second, because Maliki “repeatedly tied his personal reputation to the assault’s success,” the continued defiance of Sadr and Shiite militias called the Prime Minister’s authority and competence into question.¹⁴ Although he initially issued a seventy-two hour ultimatum calling for Mahdi army members to lay down their weapons, he had to extend the deadline to April 8th and offer “monetary rewards in exchange for arms.”¹⁵ The degree of staff planning for Operation Charge of the Knights also prompted significant concern.

Frustrated American officials claimed that the Iraqi government overestimated the ISF’s abilities, “underestimated the scale of resistance,” and failed to establish detailed and coordinated plans.¹⁶ Despite prior coordination with American leaders in Baghdad, Maliki’s impulsive thrust into Basra left Iraqi and Coalition forces without time to prepare and mass forces before mounting the attack.¹⁷ Given the historical lack of U.S. and British presence in Basra as well as the limits of Iraqi logistics and command and control, Operation Charge of the Knights would have been difficult under far better circumstances.¹⁸ The GOI’s faulty planning and coordination complicated the mission even further and contributed to perceptions that Mahdi militiamen completely defeated the Iraqi Security Forces.¹⁹

Corruption and desertion within the ISF underscored these negative perceptions and contributed to Operation Charge of the Knights’ many failures. Approximately 1,300 ISF refused to fight in Basra.²⁰ There is also evidence that numerous Iraqi soldiers and policemen surrendered their weapons to Shiite militiamen.²¹ These actions further diminished the ISF’s reputation and highlighted the Iraqi government’s inability to command the loyalty of its military forces.²²

Although Prime Minister Maliki’s attempt to clear Shiite militants from Basra was, by no means, a success, it was not an entirely unmitigated disaster. Before the operation began, the ISF did display an enhanced ability to project force in response to GOI directives. As Operation Charge of the Knight’s has continued, the ISF have managed to conduct several successful missions and have begun clearing militia strongholds.²³ During a raid on April 14th, Iraqi soldiers also freed Richard Butler, a British journalist that militiamen kidnapped two months earlier.²⁴ Nonetheless, Iraqi forces and the Government of Iraq must develop in many sectors before undertaking any additional major operations. Hopefully, the hard lessons learned in Basra will encourage continued efforts to improve planning, coordination, command, and control.

ISF/GOI Shortcomings in Basra

- Incomplete staff planning was Operation Charge of the Knight’s most significant deficiency. Statements from Iraqi military and political officials indicate a distinct underestimation of the forces required to clear Basra. Major General Abed Al-Aziz claimed that the GOI only sent two Iraqi divisions to Basra because it was a guerrilla

fight.²⁵ Similarly, Iraq's defense minister, Abdul-Kader Jassem al-Obeidi conceded, "We were surprised by a very strong resistance that made us change our plans."²⁶ These statements validate claims that GOI and ISF leaders did not fully consider the resources necessary to conduct Sawlat al-Fursan. The operation's ambiguous intent added to the confusion on ground. Some officials believed that Charge of the Knights was supposed to be a show of force while others thought it was supposed to be a major combat operation.²⁷ Maliki's eagerness to assault into the Basra thrust Iraqi forces into a well-fortified enemy stronghold without a clear commander's intent and without an organized plan of attack.²⁸

- The ISF's lack of combat enablers such as close air support, heavy armored vehicles and logistics infrastructure severely limited their ability to maneuver throughout Basra. In light of these limitations, it was doubtful that Iraqi forces could have been successful without Coalition assistance and thus, not surprising that the Iraqis called for U.S. and British help two days after Charge of the Knights began.²⁹
- Operations in Basra indicated that Iraqi Security Forces still have considerable leadership challenges. Due to the "centralized hierarchy of Iraq's armed forces, each unit's success or failure hinged on the leadership and political loyalties of the commanding officer."³⁰ Indeed, the fact that so many Iraqi soldiers and policemen either deserted or surrendered their weapons to insurgents during Charge of the Knights illustrates that the ISF are still prone to corruption, disloyalty, and intimidation.
- The GOI and ISF lost credibility during Operation Charge of the Knights. Aside from ISF desertions, Iraqis in Basra watched the Mahdi army defy Iraqi forces. They also suffered considerably. Most casualties in the city "were civilians caught in the cross-fire" while the conflicts cut off electricity and drinkable water in most neighborhoods, creating a "state of virtual siege."³¹ In order to regain the respect of Iraqi citizens in Basra, the GOI and ISF will have to demonstrate a continued commitment to rebuild the city and rid it of insurgents.³²

Signs of Progress

- Iraqi Security Forces moved approximately 10,000 soldiers to Basra without coalition assistance.³³ The ISF has not previously displayed this ability to project force. The Iraqi Air Force offered some assistance in these efforts by transporting soldiers and supplies.³⁴
- U.S. and U.K. forces quickly shifted from over watch to direct involvement in Operation Charge of the Knights. Although it is unfortunate that the Iraqis could not conduct the mission alone, the quick American and British response somewhat supports claims that Iraqis can depend upon coalition enablers during independent operations.
- The GOI and ISF have not yet abandoned Basra; they continue to engage Mahdi army fighters despite Operation Charge of the Knights' many initial mistakes.³⁵ In addition to rescuing the British journalist Richard Butler, continuing operations seized "significant quantities of arms, ammunition, and explosives."³⁶ With assistance from American and

British air and artillery strikes, the 1st and 14th Iraqi Army Divisions began clearing the Shiite militias' final strongholds on Saturday, April 19th, less than one month after Charge of Knights began.³⁷ This move into Basra's Hyyaniyah signaled phase three of the Sawlat al-Fursan.³⁸

- The GOI dismissed approximately 1,300 soldiers and policemen that refused to fight during the first days of Operation Charge of Knights.³⁹ Willingness to hold the ISF publicly accountable at this level is a recent development.
- Despite early denunciations of the fighting in Basra, "Sunni and Kurdish leaders have rallied behind Mr. Maliki."⁴⁰ This renewed support may have contributed to the recent closure of a new oil law between the GOI and the Kurdistan Regional Government.⁴¹ This new law also opened the door for economic development, allowing international oil companies to bid for licenses that permit exploration and production in six of Iraq's major oil and natural gas fields.⁴²

Overall Assessment

Operation Charge of the Knights was another reminder that Iraqi Security Forces are not yet prepared to conduct missions without significant Coalition assistance. The failures that the GOI, as well as Iraqi soldiers and policemen experienced in Basra resulted from their continued inability to conduct detailed planning, to re-supply their forces, and to draw upon organic close air support. They do not have the number of competent junior officers and noncommissioned officers needed to command and control dynamic counterinsurgency missions. Furthermore, corruption and disloyalty to the central government are still prominent issues. Finally, Iraqi forces still lack the armor and equipment needed to defeat RPG and mortar attacks.

These deficiencies are, by no means new. As numerous government reports indicated, they have plagued the ISF since 2004. It should, therefore, be no surprise that the Iraqi army and police failed to clear the Mahdi army from its heavily fortified strongholds. (See the ISW's Iraq Situation Report pp. 50-59, available from <http://www.understandingwar.org/files/reports/Iraq%20Situation%20Report.pdf>)

Although the ISF did not defeat Shiite militias in Basra, they did show minor signs of progress. It is, indeed a small triumph that 10,000 soldiers agreed to deploy to Basra and, with the exception of 1,300 dismissed troops, did not desert en masse. They have also been willing to continue fighting in Basra despite the lack of planning and coordination that hampered Operation Charge of the Knights from the beginning.

Their ongoing clearing operations have, thus far, netted some achievements. Not only did the ISF seize numerous weapons caches, they also captured "a number of wanted men," and a tribal official with connections to the Mahdi army.⁴³ Hopefully the ISF will continue to build upon these modest successes as they conduct phase three of their operations in Basra. More importantly, Iraqi and Coalition officials should evaluate the failures that stalled Sawlat al-Fursan in order to improve ISF capabilities and enhance major combat operations in the future.

¹Multinational Division Southeast Public Affairs Office, "Operation Charge of Knights Continues Progress in Basrah," Multinational Forces Iraq, 15 April 2008, available from http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18492&Itemid=128, and Jennifer Griffin, "Who Won In Basra?" *Special Report With Brit Hume*, Fox News Channel, transcript, 6pm, 7 April 2008.

²Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra," *New York Times*, 3 April 2008, p. 1.

³Major General Abed Al-Aziz, Spokesman, Iraqi Security Forces, Press Conference 27 March 2008, Multinational Forces-Iraq, transcript, available from http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press_briefings/2008/march/080327_transcript.pdf, p. 3.

⁴Major General Abed Al-Aziz, Spokesman, Iraqi Security Forces, Press Conference 27 March 2008, p. 1.

⁵James Glanz, "Iraqi Army's Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls," *New York Times*, 27 March 2008, p. 14.

⁶Reidar Visser, quoted in Dominic Evans, "RPT-Analysis-Maliki's Basra Crackdown Poses Risk for U.S.," Reuters, 30 March 2008, available from <http://www.reuters.com/articlePrint?articleId=USL30541339>.

⁷Dominic Evans, "RPT-Analysis-Maliki's Basra Crackdown Poses Risk for U.S.," and Sara A. Carter, "Iraqi Army to Lead Fight in Basra," *Washington Times*, 27 March 2008, p. 1.

⁸Tina Susman, "Sadr Rejects Order to Disarm," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 2008, available from <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/earlybird/Mar2008/e20080330591033.html>, and James Glanz, "Iraqi Army's Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls," and Dominic Evans, "RPT-Analysis-Maliki's Basra Crackdown Poses Risk for U.S."

⁹Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

¹⁰James Glanz and Michael Kamber, "Shiite Militias Cling to Swaths of Basra and Stage Raids," *New York Times*, 30 March 2008, available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/30/world/middleeast/30iraq.html?th=&emc=th&pagewa&oref=slogin>.

¹¹James Glanz, "Iraqi Army's Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls."

¹²James Glanz, "Iraqi Army's Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls."

¹³Erica Goode, "U.S. Airstrikes Aid Iraqi Army in Basra," *New York Times*, 29 March 2008, available from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/29/world/middleeast/29iraq.html?_r=1&th=&emc=th&p.

¹⁴Sabrina Tavernise and Solomon Moore, "In This Shiite Battle, A Marked Shift From the Past," *New York Times*, 30 March 2008, p. 12.

¹⁵Sara A. Carter, "Iraqi Army to Lead Fight in Basra," and Tina Susman, "Sadr Rejects Order to Disarm."

¹⁶Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

¹⁷Jennifer Griffin, "Who Won In Basra?" *Special Report With Brit Hume*, and Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

¹⁸Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

¹⁹Guy Raz, "Disaster Or Success?," Day to Day (NPR), National Public Radio, transcript, 1 April 2008, 1200pm, available from <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/earlybird/Apr2008/e20080402591481.html>.

²⁰Sholnn Freeman, "Iraq Fires Policemen, Soldiers," *Washington Post*, 14 April 2008, p. 11.

²¹Charles Levinson, "Iraqi, Al-Sadr Showdown A Test of Loyalties," *USA Today*, 2 April 2008, p. 6, and James Glanz and Michael Kamber, "Shiite Militias Cling to Swaths of Basra and Stage Raids."

²²James Glanz and Michael Kamber, "Shiite Militias Cling to Swaths of Basra and Stage Raids."

²³Multinational Division Southeast Public Affairs Office, "Operation Charge of Knights Continues Progress in Basrah."

²⁴Ernest Londono, "British Journalist for CBS Freed In Iraqi Army Raid," *Washington Post*, 15 April 2008, p. 10.

²⁵Major General Abed Al-Aziz, Spokesman, Iraqi Security Forces, Press Conference 27 March 2008.

²⁶James Glanz and Michael Kamber, "Shiite Militias Cling to Swaths of Basra and Stage Raids."

²⁷Sabrina Tavernise and Solomon Moore, "In This Shiite Battle, A Marked Shift From the Past."

²⁸Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

²⁹Erica Goode, "U.S. Airstrikes Aid Iraqi Army in Basra."

³⁰Charles Levinson, "Iraqi, Al-Sadr Showdown A Test of Loyalties."

³¹James Glanz, "Iraqi Army's Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls," and Erica Goode, "U.S. Airstrikes Aid Iraqi Army in Basra."

³²Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, and Stephen Farrell, "U.S. Cites Planning Gaps In Iraqi Assault On Basra."

³³Colonel Michael Fuller, Chief of Staff, MNSTC-I, Teleconference from Iraq moderated by Jack Holt, Chief New Media Operations, Department of Defense Bloggers' Roundtable, transcript, 27 March 2008, p. 2, and Guy Raz, "Disaster Or Success?"

³⁴Rear Admiral Patrick Driscoll, Multinational Force Iraq Spokesman and Dr. Tahseen Sheikhly, Civilian Spokesman for Operation Fard al-Qanoon, Press Interview, transcript, 20 April 2008, available from http://www.mnf-iraq.com/images/stories/Press_briefings/2008/april/080420_transcript.pdf.

³⁵Sholnn Freeman, "Iraq Fires Policemen, Soldiers."

³⁶Multinational Division Southeast Public Affairs Office, "Operation Charge of Knights Continues Progress in Basrah."

³⁷Multinational Corps-Iraq Public Affairs Office, "Operation Charge of the Knights Begins Phase 3 in Hyyaniyah," Release Number 20080419-06, 19 April 2008, available from http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18579&Itemid=128, and James Glanz and Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraqi Army Takes Last Basra Areas from Sadr Force," *New York Times*, 20 April 2008, available from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/world/middleeast/20iraq.html?_r=1&th=&oref=slogin

³⁸Multinational Corps-Iraq Public Affairs Office, "Operation Charge of the Knights Begins Phase 3 in Hyyaniyah."

³⁹Sholnn Freeman, "Iraq Fires Policemen, Soldiers."

⁴⁰Chip Cummins, "Maliki Gets Boost After Basra," *Wall Street Journal*, 17 April 2008, p. 14.

⁴¹Ben Lando, "Kurdish Leaders Reach Oil-Law Deal With Baghdad," *Washington Times*, 17 April 2008, p. 14.

⁴²Jonathan Stearns and Glen Carey, "Iraq to Open Oil-Field Bidding," *Washington Post*, 17 April 2008, p. D6.

⁴³Aswat al-Iraq (Voices of Iraq), "Sadrist Detained in Basra," 16 April 2008, available from <http://www.aswataliraq.info/look/english/articl.tpl?/IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrArticle=76569&NrIssue=2&NrSection=1>.