Fact Sheet on Iraqi Security Force Operations 2008: Basra

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Operation Overview

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki launched Operation Sawlat al-Fursan, or Charge of Knights by ordering 15,000 soldiers to Basra. The additional Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) began arriving on March 24th and attacked into the city the next day. 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. In support of this effort, Iraqi commanders also enhanced ISF operations in Najaf, Hillah, Diwaniyah, and Wasit.

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. 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.” Furthermore, many concluded that actions in Basra might prompt Sadr to end his cease-fire, an action that could severely destabilize Iraq.

Although Sadr did not lift the cease-fire, he refused disarmament orders and violence erupted in Baghdad, Kut, Diwaniyah, Hillah, Amara, and Nasiriyah. These hostilities, paired with the ISF’s inability to combat Shiite militias intensified outeries against Operation Charge of the Knights. Many U.S. and Iraqi officials insisted that the mission was badly timed and poorly conceived. 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.
indicated that the militia had “heavier and more sophisticated weapons” than the ISF.\textsuperscript{11} According to eyewitness reports, Mahdi fighters fired mortars, rocket propelled grenades, automatic weapons, and sniper rifles at seemingly helpless Iraqi army units.”\textsuperscript{12} Based on these difficulties, U.S. and British officials had to reinforce the ISF with coalition ground troops, helicopters, and air strikes.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 8\textsuperscript{th} and offer “monetary rewards in exchange for arms.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{20} There is also evidence that numerous Iraqi soldiers and policemen surrendered their weapons to Shiite militiamen.\textsuperscript{21} These actions further diminished the ISF’s reputation and highlighted the Iraqi government’s inability to command the loyalty of its military forces.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{23} During a raid on April 14\textsuperscript{th}, Iraqi soldiers also freed Richard Butler, a British journalist that militia men kidnapped two months earlier.\textsuperscript{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. 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.” 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. 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.

- 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.

- 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.” 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.” 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.

**Signs of Progress**

- Iraqi Security Forces moved approximately 10,000 soldiers to Basra without coalition assistance. 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.

- 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. In addition to rescuing the British journalist Richard Butler, continuing operations seized “significant quantities of arms, ammunition, and explosives.” 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. This move into Basra’s Hyyaniyah signaled phase three of the Sawlat al-Fursan.

- The GOI dismissed approximately 1,300 soldiers and policemen that refused to fight during the first days of Operation Charge of Knights. 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.” This renewed support may have contributed to the recent closure of a new oil law between the GOI and the Kurdistan Regional Government. 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.

**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](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. 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.


11 James Glanz, “Iraqi Army’s Assault on Militia In Basra Stalls.”

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

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


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

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


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

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

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


33 Colonel 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?”


35 Sholnn Freeman, “Iraq Fires Policemen, Soldiers.”

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


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

39 Sholnn Freeman, “Iraq Fires Policemen, Soldiers.”

