



The Basra Business. What we know and what we don't

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Much of the discussion about recent Iraqi operations against illegal Shia militias has focused on issues about which we do not yet know enough to make sound judgments, overlooking important conclusions that are already clear. Coming days and weeks will provide greater insight into whether Maliki or Sadr gained or lost from this undertaking; how well or badly the Iraqi Security Forces performed; and what kind of deal (if any) the Iraqi Government accepted in return for Sadr's order to stand down his forces. The following lists provide a brief summary of what we can say with confidence about recent operations and what we cannot.

What We Know:

* The legitimate Government of Iraq and its legally-constituted security

forces launched a security operation against illegal, foreign-backed, insurgent and criminal militias serving leaders who openly call for the defeat and humiliation of the United States and its allies in Iraq and throughout the region. We can be ambivalent about the political motivations of Maliki and his allies, but we cannot be ambivalent about the outcome of this combat between our open allies and our open enemies.

* The Sadrists and Special Groups failed to set Iraq alight despite their efforts--Iraqi forces kept the Five Cities area (Najaf, Karbala, Hillah, Diwaniyah, and Kut) under control with very little Coalition assistance; Iraqi and Coalition forces kept Baghdad under control.

* Sadr never moved to return to Iraq, ordered his forces to stop fight-

ing without achieving anything, and further demonstrated his dependence on (and control by) Iran.

* Maliki demonstrated a surprising and remarkable commitment to fighting Iranian-backed Special Groups, Sadr's Jaish al Mahdi (the Mahdi Army, or JAM), and even criminal elements of JAM. The Iraqi Government has loudly declared that "enforcing the law" applies to Shia areas as well as Sunni. Maliki has called Shia militias "worse than al Qaeda." These are things we've been pressing him to do for nearly two years.

* We've said all along that we did not think the ISF was ready to take care of the security situation on its own. Maliki was overconfident and overly-optimistic. But for those who keep pressing the Iraqis to "step up," here's absolute proof that they are willing. Are we willing to support them when they do what we demand? Can anyone reasonably argue that they will do better if we pull out completely?

* On March 30, Sadr ordered his followers to stop fighting. This decision contrasts with his 2004 decision to fight on, and his continued presence in Iran combined with this surrender results from weakness, rather than strength.

* The ISF operation did not clear Basra or destroy either Special Groups or the Mahdi Army.

* But the ISF performed remarkably well, moving numerous units to Basra on short notice, establishing

them in the city, engaging in hard fighting, and stopping only when Sadr caved.

* Special Groups launched concerted attacks in Baghdad and in the Five Cities area (the Shia heartland), but were repulsed by ISF forces acting almost alone in the Five Cities area and by a combination of ISF and Coalition forces in Baghdad.

* Throughout the operation, the Iraqi Government acted calmly and purposefully, the ISF reported for duty (the number of reported "defectors" etc. was trivial compared to the tens of thousands of forces that fought loyally), moved and fought as directed, mostly with minimal Coalition support.

What We Don't Know

* Why did Maliki launch the operation when he did?

* What was his precise aim? He continually spoke about fighting "criminal elements," but then issued an ultimatum for the disarmament of all JAM (a task clearly beyond the means of the forces he sent to Basra).

* How well did the ISF fight in Basra and, in general, what actually happened there? The absence of partnered Coalition Forces in the city makes it extremely difficult to understand the nature of the fighting and the Iraqi forces' performance--long experience in the limitations of stringers and "eyewitnesses" or hospital sources in places where we did know what had actually happened

should leave us skeptical of all initial reports of combat coming out of Basra.

* Who will gain or lose more credit in the eyes of the Iraqi people, and particularly the Shia-Maliki or Sadr? The answer to this question probably depends on what happens next.

* Did Maliki accept a deal with Sadr in return for his stand-down order and, if so, what was involved? We know what Sadr's demands were (at least publicly), but he ordered his forces to stop fighting before Maliki publicly accepted his terms.

* Will Maliki persist in his efforts to disarm JAM and Special Groups or will he lose his nerve? The answer to this question probably depends in large part on whether or not the United States shows a willingness to support the Iraqi Government.

* How will JAM and Special Groups react? Will they continue with or accelerate the offensive they had already been conducting since the start of the year, or has this operation blunted that offensive and thrown them off-balance?

* What does the agreement between tribal leaders in Dhi Qar Province and the Iraqi Government portend? Will the government accept "sons of Iraq" in Shia areas? This development could be the start of a significant shift in the political sands in southern Iraq--or not.

* There are already signs of increasing tension between Sadr and Iran--will they increase or decrease after this conflict?

This operation offers a number of extremely positive signs about the willingness of the Iraqi Government to address a fundamental challenge that has been plaguing it (and us) since 2004, the ability of the ISF to absorb country-wide efforts to light up the Shia community, and the increasingly overt malign role Iran is playing in the conflict. It can provide us with a critical opportunity to increase our influence in Shia Iraq and help encourage the development of local political movements there as we have done in Sunni areas. Most of all, it is the most overt and decisive recent engagement between our Iraqi allies and their Iranian foes. We should have no doubt about where our interests lie.

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