

British troops in pitched battle in Basra

By Chris Marsden and Julie Hyland
21 September 2005

Bloody conflict between British forces and Shiite civilians, police and militias has exposed the myth of Iraqi sovereignty and confirmed that the British Army acts as a colonial occupier.

On Monday, September 19, two British Special Air Service (SAS) soldiers were arrested in the southern city of Basra. The SAS is the British Army's covert special operations and dirty tricks unit.

Dressed to look like Arabs, the two soldiers were driving a white car, allegedly packed with weapons and explosives, when Iraqi police challenged them at a security checkpoint.

Mohammed al-Abadi, an official at the Basra governorate, told newswires that police had believed the SAS men were "suspicious." When one policeman approached the car, "one of these guys fired at him," Abadi said. One police officer was reportedly killed and several others wounded.

"Then the police managed to capture them," al-Abadi continued. "They refused to say what their mission was. They said they were British soldiers and [suggested] to ask their commander about their mission."

Reports of the men's arrest led to protests outside the police Felony Crimes Department where they were being held. Reuters television footage showed two British armoured personnel vehicles sent to the station attempting to reverse away from the crowd as it came under attack. As flames engulfed the vehicles, one soldier was seen scrambling from a top hatch, as he was pelted with stones and set on fire.

Ismail al-Waili, head of Basra's Security Committee, said that more than 10 British Army vehicles and helicopters proceeded to attack the facility, in what al-Waili described as a "barbaric act of aggression." They demolished a wall in the raid, leading to an escape by more than 100 prisoners. But the two soldiers were not there. Having interrogated local police, the army mounted a raid on a nearby house said to be under the control of Shiite militias and recovered the SAS men.

Two civilians were reported killed in the clashes, and up to 15 injured.

In the past, British-controlled Basra has been considered more stable and friendlier than Baghdad because of its

predominantly Shia population. Most of the insurgency is led by the minority Sunni Muslims and can take a communal form, involving attacks on Shia clerics and civilians.

The British Army is widely reported to have been working with Shia groups, which it has viewed as allies, and taking a "softly, softly" approach. But in recent months, a number of Shiite groupings have become overtly hostile to the occupation forces. This in part expresses the opposition of all sections of Iraqi society to what amounts to a thinly disguised form of colonial rule and, in part, an attempt by the local Shiite powerbrokers to secure their control over Iraqi oil reserves.

Three British soldiers were killed in two separate roadside bombs earlier this month, taking the total number of British casualties to 95.

Just one day before the latest incident, British military had carried out a number of arrests, including that of Sheik Ahmed Majid Farttusi and Sayyid Sajjad—two leading figures in the Shia Mehdi Army militia, led by the radical cleric Hojatoleslam Moqtada al-Sadr.

Crowds of several hundred had gathered on the streets of Basra to demand their release, blocking roads in the city centre. On Monday morning, Shiite militias had attacked the house of Basra's governor, Mohammed Musabah, with rockets and mortars, demanding the release of the two detainees.

The attitude demonstrated by the British Army towards the Iraqi police—the refusal to stop at a checkpoint, reportedly shooting at them and then the demolition of the police facility—is bound up with this growth of militant opposition.

Reports have stressed that the British Army no longer trusts the police force, considering it to have been infiltrated by insurgents. But the conditions for this were created by British policy of working with local political parties and militias.

The British Army in Northern Ireland turned a blind eye to well-known connections between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and various loyalist groups. Indeed, there is evidence that it actively colluded with hit squads against Irish Republican sympathisers.

In Basra, the army will have been aware that the police

were recruiting from amongst the militias and would have looked favourably on this as a means of reinforcing its own control. In recent months, however, the British Army has come to view the situation as having spiralled out of control and the local police as having become an extension of the insurgency.

In an earlier interview, Basra's police chief Hassan Sawadi had told the *Guardian* that he controlled just 25 percent of his police force and that militiamen inside its ranks were using their posts to murder opponents.

Since May, an estimated 65 people have been assassinated in the city. Last month, US freelance journalist Stevens Vincent was kidnapped and murdered in Basra, after writing in the *New York Times* criticising the security forces in Basra. On Monday, another reporter for the *New York Times*, Iraqi Fakher Haider, was also found dead in Basra, after reportedly being seized from his home by masked men.

Army spokesmen have taken great pains to underplay the significance of the September 19 events, with one senior official describing it as a "bump in the road." But at issue here is not only that the army faces growing hostility from the civilian population and militia groups. It has lost control of the police service.

Explaining why British forces had raided the police facility, Brigadier John Lorimer said that under Iraqi law, the soldiers should have been handed over to coalition authorities, but this failed to happen despite repeated requests. It was of "deep concern" that the two had ended up held by Shia militia, he said.

This is an unprecedented development—something that Britain never faced during its occupation of Northern Ireland. British imperialism has always relied on its ability to cultivate proxy forces from within the local elites to secure its colonial possessions. It has tried to repeat this strategy in Iraq by exploiting the conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The fact that it now faces the development of a Shia insurgency no less hostile than the Sunni opposition facing the US in the north throws a question mark over its ability to maintain control of the Basra region.

Without some local force, British troops would be forced to directly confront the civilian population at every turn, which would require a massive escalation in troop numbers. To illustrate the scale of numbers necessary, Basra has 20,000 police officers and none of them responded to the attack on British forces.

What has developed in Basra also has implications for the US occupation forces in the north. To this point, the coalition has been able to rely on its ability to recruit Shia personnel who are often the target of Sunni militias. If the emerging hostilities in the south were to be replicated in

Baghdad, this would leave the US forces even more isolated than they are already.

In addition to the worsening military situation, the events in Basra constitute a political blow for the British and US governments. Washington and London have portrayed their occupation as a necessary transition towards democratic self-rule. The fact that the British Army, when it feels its interests are threatened, is ready to shoot police officers and demolish prison facilities gives the lie to such claims. It underscores that any authority that is developed in Iraq will only be allowed to govern so long as it abides by US and British diktat.

The British government's immediate response to the violence in Basra has been to promise to send more troops. Defence Secretary John Reid said that whatever troop numbers were necessary to stabilise the situation would be dispatched. Reid unreservedly defended the actions of the army, when faced with "mob violence," and also the British occupation. "What we do know is that under the law they should have been handed back to the British forces themselves," he declared. "That is the law which enshrines our presence there."

The scale of the crisis has produced renewed calls from both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives for an exit strategy, but with the caveat that this must be "responsible"—i.e., not undertaken immediately.

In response, Reid said that the decision to withdraw UK troops would be taken when requested by the Iraqi government and would be "not an event but a process."

It is a measure of the lies and sophistry employed by the government to justify its predatory aims in Iraq that Reid coupled his troop pledge with the claim that "as we make the advance towards a democracy and build up the security forces, I freely admit that I expect that the terrorists will get more frenetic, more frantic."

The assertion that the birth of a democratic Iraq will provoke resistance from terrorists not only conceals the extent of popular opposition to British and US forces. It provides a blank cheque for yet more troops to be sent.

Basra proves once again that the precondition for the development of any genuine democratic government in Iraq is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all occupying forces.

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