



## The assessment of the British presence in Iraq (2003-2008)

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

"You can go to war whenever you want. We end it when we can."

Machiavelli

**The history of the United Kingdom is richest in "small wars", colonial conquests, counter-guerrillas or stabilisation operations. Armed with this culture, the British had the ambition to make Basra and the four provinces of south-eastern Iraq a model for the rest of Iraq. After five years of presence and 175 soldiers killed, the balance sheet appears to be mixed. This experience is nevertheless rich in lessons to be learned at a time when we are heavily engaged with the Americans in a difficult counter-guerrilla operation.**

### Powerless participation

After a short period of euphoria as the patrols were cheered in the streets of Basra, the British soldiers soon realised their lack of control over events. The forces and Her Majesty's forces were employed in a way that achieved the best political cost/benefit ratio. This resulted first of all in a very small number of forces in relation to the population to be controlled (from 8,000 in 2003 to 5,000 at the end of 2007, i.e. half of the total population). of the South-West Division, to control 5 million inhabitants, half of whom are in Basra) and a financial commitment at the same level (i.e. about 5% of the Coalition's total).

This minimal effort has of course hindered the action of the forces, as General Jackson recognised as early as December 2006 ("there is no connection between what we are doing and the means that are being put into), but it has also failed to provide the critical mass that would have enabled the United Kingdom to co-manage Iraq as authorized by the Security Council. Indeed, the leadership of the Coalition was left to the Americans and

the British were condemned to follow their powerful ally with its ambitious goals and initial blunders. The room for initiative was even further reduced with the transfer of authority to the Iraqi interim government in June 2004.

On the ground, the British military made great efforts to restore an acceptable level of security by relying on tribal powers and striving to win the esteem of the population through courtesy, minimal use of force and respect for the law. But this military action was not backed up by British civilian organisations that were slow to implement reconstruction and was polluted by a multitude of actors over whom the British had little control: American convoys, NGOs (some of them distributing Bibles), private companies, Shiite militias, and so on. It has therefore remained very superficial.

The surprise of the Mahdist revolt of 2004 was the first revelation of the weakness of Allied control over the southern region. Then, by the polls of 2005, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and its allies managed to obtain the majority of seats in all the Shiite provinces, except that of Basra, which was conquered by Mohammed al-Waeli, a member of the Fadhila party. The latter hastened to install a very lucrative "kleptocracy" which is very autonomous from the central government, in association with the Mahdi's army, which has continued its policy of infiltrating all the security bodies and controlling popular circles. The British military are totally powerless to prevent this underground progression, all the more so as, with the approach of the legislative elections (May 2005), Tony Blair's government does not want to take any risk of dispelling the illusion of a force well accepted by the population and controlling Basra.

### Loss of control

The reality of British loss of control finally came to light in Basra on 19 September 2005 after the capture by the "Major Crimes Unit", or Jameat (a Mahdist "death squad") of two SAS soldiers acting in civilian clothes. This incident followed a number of clashes and the murder of the American journalist Steven Vincent, so the British decided to mark the occasion by forcibly freeing the two SAS by a mechanised raid on the Jameat's headquarters. At the moment of withdrawal, the tanks were surrounded by a crowd of several thousand people and militiamen who bombarded them with molotov cocktails. The images of the soldiers escaping from the burning tanks destroyed the official discourse for good. For his part, Governor Waeli had all cooperation with the British suspended for nine months.

For the majority of the British press, it was then obvious that Operation Telic had failed. The Guardian speaks of "a fiasco without equivalent in recent British history". The conservative Daily Mail talks about the "catastrophic collapse of British policy in Iraq" and the Daily Express calls for the return of the soldiers. Criticism is directed at the government and not at the military, whose difficulties have generated sympathy.

The time for the "conquest of minds and hearts" is over and the priority now is to withdraw from Iraq with as little political damage as possible. The Mahdists understand this well and are multiplying FDI attacks in order to prohibit any unprotected movement and to permanently cut off the force of a population they terrorize (the monthly number of murders doubles from November 2005 to February 2006). On 5 May 2006, a helicopter was shot down over Basra, and the mission to recover the bodies of the five soldiers killed and the aircraft's carcass had to be carried out amidst firing and particularly violent demonstrations. On 31 May 2006, the Iraqi Prime Minister declared a state of emergency and sent a division to restore order, but the Iraqi army was unable to stand up to the militias. Basra descends into violence. In September 2006, the British attempt to regain

the initiative by launching Operation Sinbad. Each of Basra's eighteen districts was subjected to a 48-hour cordon-off operation followed by a two-week occupation by Iraqi troops, followed by a month's control by a team of British military police. On 18 February 2007, "Sinbad" came to an end and its proclaimed success served as a pretext for the gradual British withdrawal from Basra to the airport west of the city [1].

On 21 February 2007, believing that the British mission had achieved its objectives, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a reduced contingent of 5,500 troops for the June 2007 rotation and a full withdrawal before the end of 2008. In October 2007, for his first visit to Iraq, Gordon Brown announced a further reduction of 1,000 troops by the end of December and a further 2,000 in the spring of 2008 (a decision which has since been postponed).

From the spring of 2007, the British began to focus on missions in support of the Iraqi forces, protection of the logistical axes and, using the pretext of the growing and negative influence of Iran, border control. There they developed new modes of action (air-supplied Land rover patrols) which were highly publicised in the media but tactically of little use as the task was so immense. The whole system, like that of the other non-American allies (whose forces have halved in size in five years and who have lost 135 killed) is very vulnerable in the event of a direct confrontation with Iran.

### Lessons

The 80,000 British soldiers who have succeeded one another in Iraq have shown great professionalism. This tactical skill could not, however, and this is a historical constant, take the place of a lack of means and above all of real strategy, since the scale of the task exceeded the means of the United Kingdom and the chaotic strategy was the work of the Americans.

In retrospect, the only solution would probably have been to set up a real "imperium" with a direct military and civilian administration, under a single directorate, in the style of the Northern Ireland Ministry. This would have required legitimacy and human and financial resources not only greater than those available to the British, but also more reactively employed to achieve a "blitzkrieg peace" with the rapid restoration of security and economic functions.

This direct administration would have included a permanent component with a fixed staff for the years needed to move to the normalization phase and a rotating component of military units and civilian cells. The British military units would themselves have been reinforced and replaced by an ethnically recruited, ethnically strong and cohesive Arab Legion or Indian Army with a strong British leadership (also permanent). However, these methods had the disadvantage of being too similar to those of the colonial conquest, which could only in the long run provoke the irritation of the Iraqis and the British public, who were convinced that they were witnessing a stabilisation operation identical to the one carried out in the Balkans since 1995.

But even so, the objective of normalisation was practically unattainable because the fate of the British area of responsibility was linked to that of the whole of Iraq. In large-scale multinational stabilisation operations such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, overall success depends on the success of the United States [2]. This induces a "prisoner's dilemma" type of reasoning among all the other allies, since each of them has the choice of whether or not to become heavily involved. If they are heavily involved, the human and financial cost

will increase very quickly, whereas the expected gains depend above all on a US victory. However, this victory is both highly uncertain because the Americans are very ill-prepared for counter-guerrilla warfare and very slow to emerge because the Americans themselves have a great deal of resources and strong motivation in the fight against terrorism.

The general tendency is therefore to adopt a minimum profile in order to be credible and last while waiting for the Americans to succeed, while limiting costs. In this context, domestic policy considerations quickly take precedence, especially if the operation has been imposed on a reluctant public opinion and is being scrutinised by an opposition that lacks other grounds for confrontation.

The only real objectives then are to limit losses and blunders and then to withdraw with honour if the situation becomes too costly for a null American victory. The British Telic detachment thus cut itself off from the population by "force protection" and then by regrouping in a base outside Basra, and then withdrew to a base outside Basra. The British Telic detachment cut itself off from the population by the "protection force" and then by regrouping in a base outside Basra, before engaging in operations ("Sinbad", border surveillance, support for the Iraqi army) aimed above all at giving the illusion of a controlled withdrawal. The diplomatic losses that resulted from this policy, which ran counter to that of the Americans, were compensated for by greater involvement in Afghanistan.

At the tactical level, the fear of a judicial inquiry has added to the stress of combat, with very negative effects on morale and recruitment, particularly among reservists. The stress problems encountered by the British Army in Iraq are the most significant since the Second World War and between 1 and 2% of soldiers who are ordered to go to Iraq prefer to desert.

1) The last elements left the city in September 2007.

2) Afghanistan is the first real counter-guerrilla operation in which the French participate without being the leading nation.

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