

# Why Did It All Go Wrong?

## Reassessing British Counterinsurgency in Iraq

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BRITAIN HAS a relatively good track record in counterinsurgency (COIN).<sup>1</sup> But as one journalist commented in 2008: “the war in Iraq has been one of the most disastrous wars ever fought by Britain. It has been small, but we achieved nothing.”<sup>2</sup> Although this view can be contested, it is clear that, if judged in terms of the original aim, Britain’s achievements fell far short of expectations set in 2003. A fundamental reason for this failure was the apparent ineffectiveness of Britain’s COIN campaign. The aim of this article is to explain why a strategy used so effectively in the past unraveled in Iraq. Specifically, it challenges the view that British failure in Iraq was inevitable or that it was the product of an outdated COIN strategy.<sup>3</sup>

Although the British accounted for only five percent of the entire coalition force, such an analysis is warranted for two reasons. First, British experience of insurgency in Iraq proved to be very different from that of the Americans, and it is important to address this divergence if only because it reveals a different aspect of the campaign to stabilize the country. Initially at least, the British area of operations in the Multi-National Division (South-East) [MND(SE)] presented a relatively benign environment: there were no global insurgents, little sectarian conflict, and the six million people living in the MND(SE) were primarily Shia Arabs, most of whom welcomed the downfall of Saddam Hussein. Why then did the people rebel against the British, and why were the British unable to deal with insurgent groups which began to blossom in the south?

This last question leads into a second line of inquiry. British experience in Iraq appears to confirm the view that British COIN doctrine cannot deal with the new challenges posed by insurgents today and that, consequently, this strategy is obsolete. It is true that British counterinsurgency

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doctrine emerged in response to the challenge of maintaining imperial control over its colonies where local populations embarked on nationalist struggles of independence. This strategy also played a critical role in managing Britain's withdrawal from the empire and was used to good effect to ensure that pro-British governments were established in former colonial territories. During this period the British built up a body of knowledge based on Charles Caldwell's *Small Wars* (1896), Sir Charles Gwynn's *Notes on Imperial Policing* (1934), a government pamphlet called *Imperial Policing and the Duties of Aid to the Civil Power* (1949), Sir Robert Thompson's *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966), Julian Paget's *Counterinsurgency Campaigning* (1967), and Frank Kitson's *Low Intensity Operations* (1972). These various commentaries informed and shaped British counterinsurgency strategy and have been distilled into a series of principles that shaped the British army's approach to counterinsurgency. These principles are as follows:

1. maintain political primacy over the military and focus on finding a political solution to the conflict;
2. apply a coordinated government and security infrastructure which ties all civil, police, and military agencies into a coherent campaign;
3. develop an effective intelligence and surveillance network;
4. separate the insurgents from the people;
5. neutralize the insurgent; and
6. look forward to the future in terms of postinsurgency planning.<sup>4</sup>

The application of this framework placed a great deal of importance in terms of addressing the economic, political, and social causes of the insurgency. It also stressed the discriminate use of force and focused on winning the trust and support of the civil population. In essence, it recognized that the people rather than the insurgent's forces were the center of gravity. Using this "formula," the British were able to achieve success in Malaya (1948–60), Borneo (1963–66), Oman (1970–75), and most recently, Northern Ireland (1969–98). Most important, failures such as Palestine (1945–48), Aden (1963–67), and Cyprus (1955–59) came to be explained in terms of a failure to adhere to these principles, which served to reinforce the power of this approach.

The war in Iraq, and more recently Afghanistan, provoked a debate about the current utility of this doctrine. Initially it focused on the conduct of the US military in Iraq and the belief that a more British or classical COIN

strategy, as it was termed, needed to be applied against the insurgency that was rapidly spreading amongst the Sunni population.<sup>5</sup> However, this critical analysis of strategy very quickly infiltrated discussion within the British media, the military, and academia and focused on the deteriorating situation in the MND(SE). This debate centers on two main arguments. The first relates to the changing environment in which COIN is conducted.<sup>6</sup> The logic holds that such a construct worked well in Malaya and subsequent campaigns because the British were able to exploit a functioning colonial administration and security apparatus to fight and defeat the insurgency. Equally important were the strong cultural and social links, which stemmed from long exposure by the British to the environment and the people and gave the British security forces at least some sense of how to engage the population. Where this understanding was absent, for example in the Southern Arabian Federation in the 1960s, failure followed.

In theory this is a cause for concern because, while it is clear that British COIN doctrine proved a useful construct, even in the post-imperial era such as Oman in the 1970s, there is profound skepticism that such a strategy will work in this new setting. There is no government infrastructure and little appreciation or understanding of the target state by the intervening force.<sup>7</sup> The challenge then is to create these pillars in the vacuum that exists.<sup>8</sup> Failed states have also resulted in the proliferation of armed groups which compete with the state's forces for control. This means that a COIN campaign must now deal with a number of opponents rather than just one which, as Steven Metz explains, makes it more difficult to establish security or implement an effective conflict termination strategy.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the nature of insurgent strategy has changed. According to the likes of Metz and John Mackinlay, insurgency in the Cold War was based largely on the Maoist model of revolutionary war, and British COIN doctrine evolved to address this threat. In simple terms this strategy entailed a protracted conflict in which the insurgent moved progressively through three phases of revolution. The first focused on political mobilization and the establishment of a shadow government. The second envisaged the move to guerrilla war. Finally, when the government was sufficiently weak, the insurgent strategy would shift to open, conventional war.

The end of the Cold War made the application of this strategy problematic. This was caused in part by changing environmental conditions. Maoist revolutionary war was designed to operate within a rural setting, but the world was becoming increasingly urbanized—a trend that is very apparent

in Iraq, where over 70 percent of the population lives in cities and towns.<sup>10</sup> The application of this strategy has also become more difficult because of change in the political domain. Of particular importance here has been the decline of secular ideologies such as Marxism and Maoist political thinking and the rise of ethnicity and religion as sources of internal conflict. The reasons for this reversion to more basic and reactionary forms of identity have been linked to the social and economic impact of globalization,<sup>11</sup> but their effect has been to limit the utility of both Maoist insurgency and British COIN, because both assumed that the loyalties of a community were not fixed and could be won via promises of political and economic reform. Although this argument is controversial, it is clear that religion and identity in the form of conflict between Shia and Sunni or Sunni and Kurd played an important role in shaping the internal war in Iraq. Finally, materiel constraints also limited the extent to which insurgents could mimic past revolutionary wars. This was caused by the decline in support the great powers provided. The most obvious aspect of this decline in external support was that insurgents had limited access to heavy weapons. This made it almost impossible for a movement to progress from guerrilla to open, conventional war and overthrow the existing regime. As Metz explains, the lack of a state sponsor often precluded strategic victory in the way Mao and Ho Chi Minh realized this goal; they simply did not possess the means.<sup>12</sup> In some cases, such as Peru and Columbia, the lack of an external patron was compensated by the insurgents' ability to exploit internal sources of wealth derived from the drug trade and organized crime. However, rather paradoxically, access to this resource did not result in a renewed commitment to the three phases of revolutionary war. Instead it allowed insurgent groups, such as the FARC in Columbia, to abandon the preparatory phases of this process and move quickly to a direct and open attack against the state and its armed forces.

How then have resource-constrained insurgents attempted to deal with this challenge? Col Thomas Hammes and the fourth-generation warfare school argue that modern insurgent strategy now consciously seeks to bypass the opponent's military capability and focuses instead on fighting its war in the political domain. In this context military action is concerned with bringing about the moral collapse of the opponents by attacking their domestic political support base during wartime.<sup>13</sup> This shift in strategy reflects an increasing trend for insurgent groups to exploit new technologies as a way of generating new asymmetries. In the case of the British, Mackinlay argues that British COIN has failed to recognize that

insurgency has adapted to take advantage of new technologies in terms of mass communications, cheaper transport, and the easy transfer of money across the globe.<sup>14</sup> Most important, these developments require a COIN campaign to engage in a propaganda war that extends beyond the insurgent state to incorporate diaspora communities who have sectarian links with the insurgents but who are living in other countries, including the intervening state.<sup>15</sup>

The net effect of these changes has been to create a very different insurgent type which, it is argued, requires a new counterinsurgency strategy. So to what extent does this picture of radical change coincide with what happened to the British in the MND(SE)? If we look first at the environment, Kaldor has argued that Iraq was a failing state even before the war in 2003. An artificial political entity containing a volatile mix of ethnic and religious groups brought together to satisfy the imperial ambitions of the British after the First World War, its history was one dominated by violence, instability, and frequent coups.<sup>16</sup> Ba'ath efforts to consolidate control over Iraq through the exploitation of its oil wealth and the promotion of a secular ideology proved effective in creating a relatively cohesive state. However, this nation-building project was undermined by eight years of war with Iran, followed by the disastrous invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the UN-imposed sanctions regime, which lasted until 2003. As a result, the Iraqi state was effectively divided with the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in the north after 1991. In the south, the Ba'ath Party struggled to reimpose control, and approximately 100,000 Shia were killed in the uprising that followed Iraq's ejection from Kuwait in 1991.<sup>17</sup> The brutality of the Ba'ath government's repression of the Shia and the impact of the UN sanctions regime, which resulted in a catastrophic fall in living standards, caused the regime in the south to unravel. To compensate, Saddam relied increasingly on tribal and religious politics, both as a basis for generating support and to create new networks of control and patronage.<sup>18</sup> In parallel with these developments was the rise in criminality caused by the introduction of the oil-for-food program in 1996, which provided ample opportunities for smuggling and bribery. "Hence, on the eve of the invasion, Iraq was showing all the signs of incipient state failure."<sup>19</sup>

It is clear the British were shocked by the conditions they faced as an occupying power in the MND(SE)—a problem compounded by their failure to stop the orgy of looting that took place after the downfall of the Ba'ath government.<sup>20</sup> What this meant in practical terms was that stability

depended on achieving four key goals: (1) the establishment of a viable economy, (2) the provision of essential services, (3) stability and security, and finally, (4) governance. Failure in one of these domains was likely to impact on the other areas to produce strategic failure.<sup>21</sup>

As previous British campaigns demonstrate—although the scale of the problem was greater in Iraq—such broad policy actions had always been an implicit part of British COIN. Moreover, COIN doctrine provided the British with a model of bureaucratic management to coordinate such diverse activities. In past campaigns, the British set up a system of committees operating at the national, provincial, district, and local levels of government, which included the police, intelligence services, military, and all principal civilian departments of state. This system was designed to secure and protect the population; win their active support via psychological, political, economic, and social programs; and actively cultivate intelligence sources within the community so that a discriminate and proportionate COIN campaign could be waged against an opponent. The contemporary relevance of this construct can be demonstrated by the way it continues to influence thinking on this topic today.<sup>22</sup>

Reconstructing this apparatus in Iraq was affected by two problems. The first was the absence of a functioning local administration with which the military could coordinate its actions, and this meant importing expertise and resources from the UK and the Americans via the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The relationship between the British and the CPA also proved problematic. In theory, the British MND(SE) commander acted under the broad direction of US military commanders in Baghdad while coordinating with the CPA South on reconstruction. Therefore, a strong expectation existed within the British government and military that the CPA would focus on supporting reconstruction and development in this region. Unfortunately, in the view of Paul Bremer, head of the CPA, the MND(SE) was not a priority; for Bremer the center of gravity was Baghdad and its environs, and that is where the lion's share of the CPA reconstruction effort was focused.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the CPA only slowly established itself in the MND(SE) and when it did so, its mission was, as Rory Stewart, a CPA advisor in Maysan explained, not concerned with running a development operation. Money given to him by the CPA was supposed to support his political work and making friends, not redeveloping the MND(SE). But even had there been a commitment to reconstruction and development in the MND(SE), the CPA lacked the



necessary key skills. What it needed was a head with experience of running a large municipal authority. It also needed experts in the provision of public education, health, and management of utilities, but such expertise was virtually nonexistent in the CPA.<sup>24</sup>

The second problem lay in getting British agencies to deploy and then coordinate with the military. To succeed, it was imperative that government departments were willing to support the army in its endeavors. Although in theory these departments of state should have been directed and controlled by a cabinet subcommittee under the chairmanship of the foreign secretary, in reality no leadership was forthcoming. The committee met infrequently and was therefore unable to build a cross-departmental consensus on how to approach problems being faced in southern Iraq.<sup>25</sup> The Iraq experience led to a series of new doctrinal, procedural, and organizational initiatives to promote greater coordination on the ground in post-conflict states, but this came too late to make a real difference in Iraq. For example, the UK Stabilisation Unit, which coordinates post-conflict reconstruction, began operating in Iraq only in 2006, and the first provisional reconstruction team was set up later that year.<sup>26</sup>

The riots on 9–10 August 2003, caused by the failure of the British to restore basic services to the population, made the British government realize how tenuous its hold on the region was and how desperate was the plight of the people. As a result, the government accepted that it would be responsible for orchestrating the reconstruction and stabilization of the MND(SE) and, equally important, provide significant funding to facilitate this process. In response, the UK finally approved £500 million for reconstruction, but five months were lost before this money became available. Although that sum was subsequently increased in 2007 to £700 million,<sup>27</sup> it was still short of the estimated \$7.2 billion engineers believed was needed to repair the region's physical infrastructure in 2003.<sup>28</sup>

In essence, lack of support to the military as much as the complex environment explains British failure in the MND(SE). According to one military source, there was no coordinated plan and the military leaders were left to prepare and execute their own agenda. To this end they set out their own objectives and used their own resources to improve essential services and the economy. Initially, they tried to buy time by implementing a series of quick-impact projects funded via the Commander's Emergency Response Fund. The military were involved in all four lines of operation—security, governance, reconstruction, and long-term development—without the

support of other government departments. In terms of governance, senior officers were deployed as provincial governors; they helped establish businesses and projects. British forces on Operation Telic 2 (July–November 2003) reported that they had not been briefed on nation building before deployment, and there was no interaction with the Foreign Office or the Department for International Development. As a result, the army's civil affairs group ended up doing the work of other governmental departments. It also became clear that the CPA lacked the skilled personnel to implement reconstruction and was forced to rely on the British army to provide key personnel. Even the CPA's development plan for the MND(SE) was based on the army's Emergency Implementation Plan devised in August 2003. Once the Iraqi interim government was established in June 2004, the British reduced their nation-building activities and focused on security sector reform.

What then of the insurgents? Superficially, the plethora of armed groups in the MND(SE) and their multiple agendas conveys the impression of a "post-Maoist insurgency." Although al-Qaeda had no physical presence in the area, it was able to capitalize on the alienation of a minority of British Muslims who conspired to carry out a series of terrorist attacks on the UK mainland as a protest at Britain's war against Islam.<sup>29</sup> Incidents like the torture of Iraqi looters in 2003 and the murder of a hotel clerk, Baha Mousa, in 2004 also provided powerful propaganda to insurgent groups in Britain and Iraq.<sup>30</sup>

Appearances can be deceptive, however, and it is the contention of this article that the main political groups in the MND(SE) had more in common with a Maoist as opposed to a post-Maoist insurgency. These groups were not interested in communicating with the populace of the intervening state; rather, their focus was on the Shia population in Iraq. Moreover, the vast diffusion of parties which came into existence in 2003 increasingly came under control of three Islamist groups, which were structured and organized in a familiar and orthodox manner. The principal Islamist parties in the south were the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the Sadrist movement, and the Fadhilla Party. All three acted in a rational if opportunistic way to increase their power and, as such, cooperated with the British when it suited them and attacked when it did not. A similar attitude prevailed in terms of their relationship with the central government. It could be argued that such action does not constitute an insurgency, but this is naïve. A cursory glance through history shows that the Chinese



Communist Party, the classic insurgent force, was willing to form an alliance with the Nationalist government on two occasions before finally overthrowing it. Moreover, it is also clear that the parties in Iraq had a common agenda in that they opposed the creation of a secular government and wanted an Islamic republic.<sup>31</sup> This attitude was very apparent when the British took over, and all such groups tried to subvert British efforts to reestablish governance in the south. As Allawi explains:

Iraq's inhabitants did not meet the invasion with joyous scenes of welcome for a liberating army. The collapse of the decades-old dictatorship left a power vacuum, especially in the South and the poor Shi'a suburbs of Baghdad. Islamist forces and their allies, who laid claim to the loyalty of the population, quickly filled the power vacuum. Parallel power structures evolved in nearly all towns and cities of southern Iraq, but they remained undetected by officials installed by the occupying authorities.

The speed and extent of the Islamist wave that swept over Shi'a Iraq was as if a tsunami had silently and very rapidly spread to cover the south. No one had predicted the strength of this wave and the depth of support it engendered amongst the poor and deprived population of the area.<sup>32</sup>

Influence and control were achieved by traditional means. In the case of the ISCI, it used Iranian subsidies to buy influence in the south, and it is claimed that during the war in 2003 large elements of the ISCI and its armed wing, the Badr Corps, infiltrated across the border, seized many of the district towns, and established their own political and security apparatus in areas like Maysan.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Moqtada al-Sadr reactivated a political and religious movement which had been created by his father but driven underground by the Ba'ath government. During that time it continued to provide support to the Shia through the local mosques and charities. Thus, when the Ba'ath government collapsed in 2003, Moqtada al-Sadr was able to mobilize a latent network of support amongst the Shia and establish his movement as a dominant force in Shia politics. Later, Sadrist militias also drew on Iranian material and financial support to conduct increasingly sophisticated attacks against the British.

What is particularly interesting is how the Islamist groups in the MND(SE) were able to crowd out other nascent political organizations and even suppress or incorporate tribal militias. The emergence of a secular opposition was limited because Saddam's internal security destroyed secular opposition parties.<sup>34</sup> In spite of this, in 2003, 22 of 38 political parties that emerged in the south were secular in nature, but the Islamists

very quickly came to dominate.<sup>35</sup> This was caused in part by the British, who seemed ready to ally with organizations like the ISCI to the extent that they ignored the activities of its militia. Moreover, a genuine effort seems to have been made to reach an accommodation with all the Islamist parties, including the Sadrists.<sup>36</sup>

The dominance of religious parties was reinforced by a failure to provide physical security to the wider populace. According to one CPA official in the south, this was the critical weakness of the occupation in the MND(SE).<sup>37</sup> The inability of the British to fill the security vacuum allowed the armed Islamist parties to remove any opposition to them. Through the use of targeted violence, such groups eliminated alternative sources of political activity. This included members of the former regime, the tribes, and eventually the secular elements of the middle classes, who were forced increasingly to look to the Islamist militias for protection.<sup>38</sup>

The fundamental problem was that the British did not have sufficient force to control the MND(SE). Overall, troop levels fell drastically during the summer of 2003 from 26,000 to 9,000 to cover four provinces, and in 2005 there were only 7,200 British troops in the region plus small contingents from other countries. This meant that forces on the ground were stretched thinly. In 2003 the British deployed a force of 1,000 troops to provide security in Maysan, an area the size of Northern Ireland, which included the city of Ammara with a population of over 400,000. This also entailed deploying a force of just 70 soldiers to secure a 200-mile border with Iran.<sup>39</sup> In the case of Northern Ireland, however, the ratio of soldiers to civilians was approximately 1:50; in the case of Iraq that ratio was 1:370.<sup>40</sup>

Improving the security situation was also hindered by the British failure to secure all the arms dumps in the area under their control. By February 2004, UK forces had disposed of 680,000 tons of munitions. However, this was only a fraction of the total tonnage of ordnance left behind in the south, and the British admitted that of the 62 captured ammunition sites recorded, they had only cleared 13.<sup>41</sup> A report published by Human Rights Watch noted that many of these sites were located in urban areas and were easy to access. Not only did this represent a significant safety threat to the civilian population, it also provided insurgents with a readily available supply of ammunition.<sup>42</sup>

The biggest problem initially was the extensive criminality in the area. According to Toby Dodge, organized crime accounted for 80 percent of

the violence in Iraq. Organized crime, which focused on oil smuggling, existed during the time of Saddam Hussein and flourished in the 1990s, as sanctions took effect and the regime's control of society declined. Such groups flourished in the chaos of the occupation, the absence of law and order, the ready availability of small arms, and the lack of intelligence about Iraqi society.<sup>43</sup> The initial British response to these security problems was not that dissimilar to the Americans, in that they tried to increase their presence on the streets through frequent patrolling. In Basra, the British undertook between 1,000 and 2,000 patrols per week. Inevitably this brought the army into conflict with thieves, carjackers, kidnappers, smugglers, and even pirates, but there was also an element of Islamist and nationalist attacks, suggesting political opposition to the occupation.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, establishment of this military presence caused conflict between the people and the army. It appears that the British were as culturally unaware as their American counterparts when attempting to establish security.<sup>45</sup> In June 2003, six military policemen were killed by a mob over the British army's efforts to seize all firearms possessed by the civilian population. Apparently, the city of Majar al Kabir had proved ungovernable, even during Saddam's reign, and had liberated itself from Ba'ath rule, so its citizens did not perceive the British as liberators when they arrived. British efforts to establish law and order in the city through random house searches and the use of dogs to search for explosives resulted in sporadic fighting between locals and the British. It was in the midst of this violence that the MPs were trapped in the local police station and killed by protesters. This demonstrated the conditional nature of the support for the occupation in the south.<sup>46</sup>

An obvious solution to the problem of a lack of troops was to use the existing local security apparatus to supplement and reinforce British actions. Indeed, the British had assumed that a functioning Iraqi police force and army would be available to impose stability and security. To this end, they attempted to reactivate the local Iraqi police, and by May 2003, more than 900 police were available for service. However, it soon became clear that the police were ineffective, because under the Ba'ath government, law and order in southern Iraq was provided by the military and the Ba'ath intelligence services; the police functioned merely as the eyes and ears of those agencies and were not trained to sustain law and order.<sup>47</sup> These weaknesses were compounded by the process of de-Ba'athification, which removed what little leadership existed within the local police force.<sup>48</sup> This

effectively meant that local policing became the responsibility of the British army. However, it was hindered in this process because it did not possess any real knowledge or understanding of the various criminal gangs. Confronted by violence and obvious criminal acts, the army found it impossible to identify who the real culprits were and, as Sir Hilary Synott points out, arresting everyone simply caused antagonism and ill feeling within the local community.<sup>49</sup>

The security situation in the MND(SE) was made worse because of the decision to demobilize the Iraqi military. This and the decision to carry out de-Ba'athification are probably two of the most controversial decisions made by the CPA and had a significant impact on Iraq's security and stability. In a country where 40 percent of the adult population was already unemployed, this served to reinforce Iraqi anger and provided the militias with access to a vast pool of trained manpower.<sup>50</sup>

Confronted by a deteriorating security situation, tribal and religious leaders began raising their own militias. Synott explains that the British adopted what he describes as a more "nuanced approach" to this trend than the CPA, which attempted to ban all militias. The lack of a more robust response to this disturbing phenomenon was based on the realization that it would prove militarily impossible to impose such a ban and the recognition that there were good reasons why people were trying to organize security in their local area.<sup>51</sup> However, this did not provide a satisfactory long-term solution, and the British were forced to begin the process of reconstructing the state security apparatus. This entailed not just the recruitment and training of a national army and police force but also the establishment of a judicial and penal infrastructure which could deliver justice.

The British faced a series of problems in achieving this goal. The first and most important requirement was the creation of a brand new police force, but the army did not have the training or manpower to provide this facility, and the Home Office and British police showed a strong aversion to becoming involved. An inability to disarm the militias sometimes resulted in the rather bizarre arrangement of absorbing them into the police. This at least is what seems to have happened in Maysan.<sup>52</sup> Given the urgency of the situation and the pressure on the British to do something, they decided to go along with these arrangements and badged these forces as policemen; only Sadrist forces were excluded. Subsequently, the British were heavily criticized for the lax hiring policy when recruiting for the police

and the army. The only restriction imposed was that those who served in the Iraqi intelligence services, the Fedayeen Saddam, or the Ba'ath party were not allowed to apply.<sup>53</sup> As a result, the security services were heavily infiltrated by the militias and provided a convenient cover to instigate violence against known opponents. According to one source, 80 percent of the murders in Basra in 2006 were orchestrated through the police.<sup>54</sup>

According to one observer, COIN is won or lost in the first 100 days.<sup>55</sup> The examples of Malaya and Northern Ireland demonstrate that this is not true in all cases, and perhaps a greater investment on the part of the British in 2003 and 2004 might have halted the deteriorating situation in the MND(SE). However, events beyond British control served to exacerbate an already precarious situation. These external forces are important because they also challenged the logic and coherence of British COIN doctrine.

The first of these upheavals was caused by the CPA's political and economic policies, which amounted to optimism-run riot and served only to alienate and anger many Iraqis. The second was the CPA and the American military decision to target Moqtada al-Sadr in 2004. The repercussions of this conflict spread rapidly into the MND(SE), where there was a significant upsurge in attacks against the British. In July 2004, British forces suffered only seven attacks, but this increased to over 850 assaults on British patrols and bases in August 2004 at the height of the Sadrist uprising.<sup>56</sup> The third was caused by national elections and the delay experienced in creating a new government in 2005. This resulted in an increase in militia violence in the MND(SE) as the various parties jockeyed to improve their relative positions.<sup>57</sup> The fourth factor was the ongoing violence caused by the conflict over resources.<sup>58</sup> This was not confined to control of oil smuggling, but extended to the Iraqi state itself. Control of government ministries and, more importantly, the security services provided an important source of money and resources. As a result, the principal militias in the MND(SE) had representation at the local, regional, and even national levels of government. In the case of Basra, the Fadhillah Party controlled the post of governor, the oil protection force, and the customs police force. The ISCI had representation in the intelligence services, and the Sadrists controlled the local police. As a result, the British found themselves in a situation where action taken against the militias caused the local or provincial government and/or police to intervene to protect the militias.<sup>59</sup> The last key milestone in the breakdown of relations between British forces and the Islamists was the decision to take action

against a police intelligence unit known as Jamiat in September 2005. This unit was under the control of the militias, and it was known that two British soldiers had been captured and handed over to them. Military action was taken to release the men but resulted in significant clashes with the local population. In response to this attack, Basra's governor, Muhammad al-Waeli, condemned the British, and the Islamist-controlled provincial council suspended cooperation with the British.

Thereafter, the British played an increasingly marginal role in the MND(SE), and questions were asked about the continuing utility of having British forces in Iraq. The British seemed unable to stop the mounting violence and increasingly became the focus of attacks by the militias. In late 2006, the chief of the General Staff declared that the British had overstayed their welcome and were now part of the problem rather than the solution. Operation Sinbad in late-2006 and early-2007 was Britain's last effort to establish security and stability in Basra, but this offensive provided only temporary relief, as the militias simply retreated in the face of clear-and-hold operations launched by British forces and then returned once the British left. The increasing number of attacks against the British garrison in Basra, which peaked in August 2007, is evidence of the limited success of Sinbad. So bad was the situation that the British decided to withdraw their garrison from the city to Basra Air Station in September. By the end of 2007 the British officially handed over Basra province to the Iraqi government and declared the end of their combat role and the move to "overwatch," which entailed continuing the mentoring of Iraqi forces and provision of military assistance if requested.

## **Conclusion**

In this short article I have attempted to show that British failure in Iraq was not due to a new kind of insurgency, and whilst the environment proved challenging, this did not make defeat inevitable. There appears to be a broad consensus that many of the errors made by the British and the United States were avoidable rather than preordained. A properly coordinated and resourced phase IV plan implemented in 2003 might have allowed the British to exploit the window of opportunity that existed in the early stages of the occupation and generated stronger support for the continued presence of the British in the years that followed. Winning in the MND(SE) required the British to provide physical security to the



populace along with sufficient aid so that the people looked to the British rather than to the Islamists for support. Most important, the creation of economic and social networks within the Shia community might also have resulted in a better intelligence picture, which is vital in a COIN campaign and yet was clearly missing in the MND(SE). British efforts to win the support of the people were affected by the CPA and the American military, but the critical failure was the British government's unwillingness to accept its role as an occupying power or the financial liability it entailed. Ironically, British experience in Iraq demonstrates that failure was not due to an obsolete doctrine but happened because the British never implemented a proper counterinsurgency strategy. Whether this strategy is viable in other conflicts is open to question, and clearly there are new challenges in terms of alliance politics and dealing with a potentially uncooperative host government, but these were not insuperable problems, and their importance in Iraq was amplified by poor decisions made in London. The political will to prosecute a COIN campaign was clearly lacking within the British government, and eventually even the military's "can do" attitude steadily eroded, as it became clear that it did not have the resources or political direction to contest the key center of gravity in Iraq: the people. **SSQ**

## Notes

1. See Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counter Insurgency in the Post Imperial Era* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995).

2. Patrick Cockburn, "A gross failure that ignored history and ended with a humiliating retreat," *Independent*, 17 March 2008.

3. John Mackinlay, "Is UK Doctrine Relevant to Global Insurgency?" *RUSI Journal* 152, no. 2 (April 2007): 34–38.

4. Ministry of Defence, Army Field Manual, vol. 1, pt. 10, *Counter Insurgency Operations*, July 2001, A-2.

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