

# WebMemo



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## The Battle for Basra: Britain Should Launch a Troop Surge in Iraq

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As the battle between Iraqi security forces and Iranian-backed Shia militias raged in the port of Basra over the past week, British troops remained largely on the sidelines. Thirty-thousand Iraqi soldiers were sent into the city by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to retake control from the Mahdi Army led by Iranian-based firebrand cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, but they struggled to gain a foothold and defeat the heavily armed militias.

Al-Sadr has since declared a temporary cease-fire and has ordered his men off the streets, but there is no prospect that they will lay down their arms, and the militias remain in control of large swathes of Basra. There have been reports of some Iraqi forces either deserting or defecting to the Mahdi side. The fighting spread to other towns in the south, including Nasariyah and Hilla, as well as to Baghdad, with more than 250 people killed across Iraq and several hundred injured.

President Bush described the Iraqi offensive as “a defining moment in the history of a free Iraq.” U.S. forces were involved in a series of raids against al-Sadr’s followers in the capital, and American jets took part in air strikes in support of Iraqi forces in Basra. In contrast, Great Britain, with 4,100 troops stationed at an airbase on the outskirts of the city, chose to stay out of the conflict, with the exception of logistical support and limited artillery shelling of Mahdi Army mortar positions. There are, however, indications of a rift emerging over tactics among British diplomats and military chiefs.<sup>1</sup>

As the battle for Basra progresses, it will be increasingly difficult for Britain to stay out, and with

the possibility of a defeat for the Iraqi army, London will be faced with a difficult choice: to accelerate Britain’s departure from southern Iraq or to stand and fight. It is the latter option that is the right strategic choice for Britain to make. Since pulling out of Basra last September, Britain has sent a half-hearted and weak message to terrorist groups operating in the south. That stance must change, and British forces must be given the freedom to actively engage and defeat the enemy.

**Britain Should Send More Troops to Iraq.** Downing Street should reverse earlier plans to withdraw 2,500 British troops from Iraq in the spring and instead reinforce troop strength around Basra with the addition of at least 2,000 soldiers drawn from bases in Germany (where 15,000 troops are stationed). This would increase Britain’s deployment in Iraq to more than 6,000.

The three British battle groups based outside of the city<sup>2</sup>—the 1st Battalion Scots Guards with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior armored vehicles, the 1st Battalion the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment, and the 1st Battalion the Mercian Regiment—should be deployed inside Basra itself to inflict a decisive blow against the Mahdi Army. The Royal Air Force, with its 18 units in Iraq, should also play an active role in

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bombing raids against insurgents in and around Basra, alongside their U.S. counterparts.

It is an unfortunate reality that after years of underfunding, and with another major war to fight in Afghanistan (where 8,000 British troops are based), Britain's armed forces are seriously overstretched, underresourced, and undermanned. Britain spends less on its armed forces than at any time since the 1930s. Incredibly, the U.K. even has a defense secretary, Des Browne, who acts on a part-time basis (his other job is Secretary of State for Scotland). It will take years of increased defense spending to stop the rot and address this state of affairs. However, the immediate battle in Iraq is too important for Britain to walk away from it, and resources must be urgently reallocated to the war there.

**Why Britain Should Intervene.** As the power that liberated the south from the brutal fist of Saddam Hussein's Baathist rule, the U.K. has a responsibility to see the mission through and help to ensure that Iraq's second-biggest city (with 2.6 million people) does not descend into a state of barbarism and anarchy, ruled by vicious gangs for whom the rule of law is an alien concept. The future freedom of millions of Iraqis in the south may ultimately depend upon the willingness of Britain to intervene against armed thugs who are terrorizing Basra, smuggling arms and oil, extorting money from businesses, and imposing mob rule.

There are also important strategic reasons for a robust and aggressive British presence. There is a vital need to maintain security along the Iraq-Iran border, as well as to protect the supply routes that run from Kuwait to Baghdad. Iran, the world's biggest sponsor of international terrorism, would be a huge geostrategic beneficiary of a British pullout from the south, where it already wields great political influence.

The regime in Tehran remains a major threat to long-term peace and stability in Iraq, and Iran continues to arm many of the groups responsible for the killing of Coalition and Iraqi forces. According to

General Petraeus, the Quds Force, a branch of the Revolutionary Guards, was responsible for training, funding, and arming the insurgents behind the recent mortar and rocket attack on the Green Zone. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's theocratic dictatorship represents the biggest nation-state threat to international security of this generation. It is a brutal and highly dangerous tyranny that already has British and American blood on its hands and is actively waging war against Allied forces.

On a geopolitical level, the war in Iraq is an important symbol of the strength of the Anglo-American special relationship. The liberation of Iraq was overwhelmingly the work of the United States and Great Britain, and a premature withdrawal of British forces would not only place a significant extra burden on U.S. forces on Iraq, but also strain relations between London and Washington.

Britain, like the United States, is a warrior nation that prides itself on winning wars and standing its ground in the face of adversity. There is a real danger that this hard-earned reputation would be shattered by a refusal to intervene in Basra. It would be interpreted as a retreat and a humiliation not only by Iran, but also by al-Qaeda, which views Britain as its biggest enemy alongside the United States. It would weaken not only the ties that bind the U.S. and U.K., but also Britain's standing as a world power, a factor that must weigh heavily on any decision taken by the British government.

**The Success of the U.S. Surge.** The U.K. should follow the example of the successful U.S. surge campaign, launched more than a year ago with the phased introduction of an additional 30,000 American soldiers in central Iraq. It demonstrated that the West is capable today of fighting and winning a protracted counter-insurgency war against well-armed and highly trained militia groups thousands of miles away in the Middle East.

Since June 2007, terrorist attacks in Iraq are down by more than 60 percent, with a 90 percent reduction in Anbar Province, once a hotbed of al-

1. Rift Between UK Diplomats and Army in Basra," *The Daily Telegraph*, March 28, 2008, at [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/28/wirq328.xml](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2008/03/28/wirq328.xml).
2. British Warplanes Fire on Basra as Civil War Looms with Shia Militia," *TimesOnline*, March 29, 2008, at [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article3642863.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/iraq/article3642863.ece).

Qaeda activity. Iraqi civilian deaths fell by more than 70 percent in the eight months following July 2007, and Coalition military losses have decreased by the same figure in the period since May of last year. Overall ethno-sectarian violence is down by nearly 90 percent since June 2007, its lowest level since early 2005. Bombings in Baghdad are now at their lowest level since late 2005/early 2006, with weekly terrorist attacks falling to 57 per week in the past four months, down from 225 a week in summer 2007.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Qaeda is on the run across large swathes of the Sunni heartlands, with previously warring Iraqi factions now uniting against the foreign Jihadists who have ravaged their country. Such is the improvement in the security situation that Iraqi security forces are now responsible for nine of the nation's 18 provinces. Operation Phantom Phoenix, a series of joint Iraqi–Coalition operations launched in January of this year to hunt down remaining al-Qaeda cells operating in Iraq, has already resulted in

the capture of 26 senior al-Qaeda leaders, with several hundred terrorists killed, including 142 in Mosul alone.<sup>4</sup>

**Iraq Is Part of a Global War.** The conflict in Iraq is part of a much larger war that the free world is waging against al-Qaeda and a range of state-sponsored international terrorist groups backed by rogue regimes such as Iran and Syria. The battles on the streets of Iraq have a direct relevance to the national security of Great Britain, the United States, and their allies; walking away from this front line of the war against Islamist terrorism would significantly increase the terrorist threat to the West itself. Both Afghanistan and Iraq are major battlefields in this conflict, and it is vital that Britain maintain a commitment to fighting on both fronts. It is time for Prime Minister Gordon Brown to demonstrate some Churchillian grit and act more like a lion than a lamb.

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3. *Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress in Accordance with the Department of Defense Appropriations Act 2008, March 2008, at [www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master%20%20Mar08%20-%20final%20signed.pdf](http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/pdfs/Master%20%20Mar08%20-%20final%20signed.pdf).
4. Operational Update: Major General Kevin J. Bergner, Spokesman, Multi-National Force Iraq, March 5, 2008, at [www.mnfiraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17446&Itemid=99999999](http://www.mnfiraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17446&Itemid=99999999) and Operational Update: Rear Admiral Gregory Smith, Multi-National Force Iraq, February 13, 2008, at [www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17039&Itemid=131](http://www.mnf-iraq.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17039&Itemid=131).