

**"America's Best Political Newsletter"** Out of Bounds Magazine  
**counterpunch**  
**edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair**

*Special Report from the Battlefields*

## **Who's Actually Winning in Iraq?**

By PATRICK COCKBURN

The American occupation of Iraq follows the same course as that of British rule after the First World War. At first there was imperial over-confidence following military victory and a conviction that what Iraqis did was of no importance. Then there was the shock and surprise of an Iraqi rebellion against the British in 1920 and the Americans after 2003. In both cases the occupiers responded by establishing an Iraqi national government but with limited powers. In 1930 under the Anglo-Iraqi treaty Iraq achieved nominal independence and joined the League of Nations but Britain retained two large bases and remained the predominant power in Iraq. Iraqi governments were tainted and lacked legitimacy because of Iraqis' perception that their rulers were foreign pawns until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958.

America is now behaving in much the same way. It is negotiating a security agreement to replace the present UN mandate. It is to all intents and purposes a treaty that will determine future relations between Iraq and the US. It is not being called a treaty only because President Bush does not want to submit it to Senate approval. But in effect it continues the occupation under another name. The US will keep possession of over 50 bases though there will be a few Iraqi soldiers manning an outer perimeter so the US can say they will be in Iraqi hands. American soldiers and contractors will have legal immunity. The US will be free to carry out operations against 'terrorists' without informing the Iraqi government so it can arrest Iraqis or carry out military campaigns as and when it feels like it. Some of the Iraqi negotiators have been horrified by the extent of the American demands which would mean long term American control. But the Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, whatever his private misgivings, believes that at the end of the day he relies on American backing. His coalition of Shia religious parties, Sunni representatives and the Kurds feel the same way.

The Iraqi-American security agreement, which Bush wants signed by July 31, is a better barometer of where real power lies in Iraq than military developments on the ground. It comes just as the Iraqi government is trying to regain control of the largest cities in the country. It has launched three military offensives since the end of March against Shia militias and Sunni insurgents, sending its army into Basra, Sadr City in Baghdad and Mosul. Thousands of Iraqi soldiers have moved into Shia districts once dominated by the Mehdi Army which follows the nationalist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. In the Sunni Arab city of Mosul the government claims it is crushing the last remnant of al-Qa'ida in Iraq and has arrested over 1,000 suspects. The aim

of the prime minister Nouri al-Maliki is to show that the Iraqi state, feeble and dependant on the US since the fall of Saddam Hussein, is back in business. The operations in Basra and Mosul have bombastic names – ‘Charge of the Knights’ and ‘Roar of the Lion’ – in a bid to underline Maliki’s intention to show that the Iraqi army is the strongest non- American military power in Iraq.

At first sight the government seems to be succeeding after initial failures. The attack on the Mehdi Army in Basra on March 25 at first made no headway and Iraqi soldiers even ran out of food after a couple of days fighting. They had to be heavily reinforced by American advisers calling in US air strikes and British artillery fire. But, after a few weeks, government soldiers were taking over in districts long held by the Mehdi Army. In Sadr City—with a population of two million it is less of a district of Baghdad than a twin city—the Americans again bore the brunt of the fighting. Some 1,000 Iraqis, 60 per cent women and children according to the UN, were killed in seven weeks. In both Basra and Sadr City the clashes ended because Muqtada al-Sadr called his men off the streets under ceasefires brokered by the Iranians. The Iraqi army moved in though without the Americans. Maliki may not have won the decisive military victory he claimed, but his government looked stronger at the end of the fighting than at the beginning.

The crucial political and military question in Iraq is whether the Iraqi government’s success will be long lasting or temporary. Will it lose control once again if al-Sadr orders his militiamen back into the streets? Are al- Qa’ida and other Sunni insurgents simply lying low and waiting for American troops to leave? Again and again in the last five years, the US and its Iraqi allies have genuinely believed that they were winning on the ground only to see their supposed successes evaporate when their opponents launched a counter-attack. But for the moment at least Maliki’s grip on central government is stronger than ever. A year ago the Americans and the Kurds wanted him replaced, as did the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), the biggest Shia party in his governing coalition. But Washington soon began to stress privately that it wanted Iraq to appear as politically stable as possible during an election year in the US, while the Kurds and ISCI came to believe that they could get most of what they wanted with Maliki in power. For the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein, many Iraqis think the present government might last.

This may be misleading. The government’s position looks stronger than it is because its opponents are waiting for the Americans to leave or draw down their forces. Al-Sadr does not want to fight now because he sensibly wishes to avoid a direct military confrontation with the US army, which his lightly armed militiamen are bound to lose. This has been his strategy ever since his militiamen fought ferocious battles with the US Marines in Najaf in 2004. The Iranians are playing a more and more overt role in Iraq this year and do not want to see an intra-Shia civil war between ISCI and the Sadrists. The Iraqi Minister of Defense says that the Iraqi army will not be strong enough to stand on its own against insurgents until 2012. A further weakness of the government is that it faces crucial provincial elections in October which its constituent parties may well lose. One US military intelligence estimate is that in a fair poll the Sadrists would win 60 per cent of the vote in overwhelmingly Shia southern Iraq. The surprise government offensive at the end of March may have been launched in order to make sure that the vote can be fixed in favor of the government parties. A more Machiavellian explanation is that ISCI expected the Iraqi army to fail and wanted to lure the American army into a military confrontation with the Sadrists.

The government parties supporting Maliki now make up what some Iraqis called ‘the Council of Five’. There are the two Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—the Dawa party to which Maliki himself belongs, ISCI and the Islamic Party of the Sunni. Their aim seems to be to eliminate their domestic Iraqi opponents while they still have the backing of American firepower. It is a brutal plan but it might come off.

Maliki could become the Iraqi version of Vladimir Putin in Russia. Like Putin, Maliki controls the state machine, a large if unreliable army and benefits from the high price of oil so he has control of over \$40 billion in unspent reserves. Iraqis do not trust their own government but, like Russians when Putin first came to power in 1999, they are desperately war weary. Many people will support anybody who provides peace and security. But the analogy should not be carried too far. Putin's enemies were fictional or in distant Chechnya, while Maliki's opponents are real, dangerous and close by.

I was in Mosul, a city of 1.4 million people on the Tigris river in northern Iraq, on the day the government forces started their 'Roar of the Lion' offensive at 4 am on May 10. As had happened in Basra and Sadr City a few weeks earlier there were thousands of government troops and police guarding every street and alleyway. The entire civilian population had disappeared indoors or had fled the city. The operation, supposedly aimed at depriving al Qa'ida of its last bastion in Iraq, had been promised by Maliki some months earlier after a previous chief of police of Mosul was assassinated by a suicide bomber with explosives hidden under his police uniform. But its actual timing had caught people in Mosul by surprise so they had no time to stock up on food. Nobody was venturing onto the streets because of a curfew. In the first hours of the operation US troops shot dead men, a woman and a child in a car which failed to stop at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Mosul because, according to a US military statement, the two men were armed and one man inside the car made 'threatening movements.'

I have been visiting Mosul ever since the Kurds and Americans captured it in 2003. Each time I go there the Kurdish authorities, who effectively run the city, allocate more armed guards to protect what ever official I am travelling with. We began the journey from Arbil in a convoy of white pick up trucks, each with a heavy machine gun in the back manned by alert- looking soldiers, some with black face masks, escorting Khasro Goran, the deputy governor of Mosul, to his office in the old Baathist headquarters on the left bank of the Tigris. The official border between Kurdistan and Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital, is the Zaab river, very low this year because of poor rainfall. But the real frontier is further down the road at a small village called Ghazik after which the road becomes increasingly dangerous. At a bridge near Ghazik police were stopping trucks and cars whose drivers had not heard of the curfew declared late the previous day. A few miles further on in a Chaldean Christian village called Bartilla we turned into a fort and exchanged our pick-ups for more heavily armoured vehicles with small windows like spy holes with thick bullet proof glass.

People in Nineveh province were taking the curfew very seriously. There are kilns processing gypsum along the road through the plain east of of Mosul city but none of them was working. Even the dreary tea houses serving food to truck drivers were closed. The Kurdish minority in east Mosul city live close to a small hill on top of which there is the mosque of Nebi Yunis, where the Prophet Jonah is supposedly buried. Usually the Kurdish districts of the city are filled with street traders but during the present operation the metal grill of every shop was down. The operation was being carried out by 15,000 troops, the three brigades of the 2nd and 3rd divisions that are normally stationed in Mosul and an extra brigade from Baghdad. I could see the black vehicles of Interior Ministry special commandos with a yellow tiger's head insignia on their doors. American drones and helicopters passed over head but I did not see any American troops patrolling the city. There was the occasional burst of machine gunfire in the distance but no street fighting.

On the face of it the government had control of Mosul. This was not difficult to do because, unlike Baghdad and Basra, insurgents had never taken over entire districts. But everything in Nineveh province is a little different from what it looks. "The province is more like Lebanon," said Saadi Pire, the former leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the city, "than anywhere else in Iraq." It is divided between the Sunni Arabs, the Kurds and Christians, but

many of the Kurds belong to the Yazidi sect which believes in a mixture of Zoroastrianism, Islam and Christianity. Their chief divinity is the peacock angel who rules the cosmos with six other angels. Last year a Yazidi girl who converted to orthodox Islam to marry her boyfriend was beaten to death by her relatives and in revenge Muslim Kurds dragged 23 Yazidi workers off a bus near Mosul and shot them dead. The government in Baghdad might claim that it was pursuing al Qa'ida in Mosul, but real power struggles in northern Iraq revolve around sectarian and ethnic differences. The Sunni majority in Mosul certainly see the 'Roar of the Lion' operation as being directed against them. Any al- Qa'ida in Mosul had long left the city for the country or had temporarily moved across the nearby Syrian border. Everybody I spoke to in Mosul expected they would be back.

In Baghdad there is also a sense that we are seeing a lull rather than end to violence. Places I used to know well still get destroyed. I used to eat in a restaurant in the al-Mansur district of west Baghdad called the Samad. It opened soon after the fall of Saddam Hussein, served good food and somehow survived the next five years of violence. But at 5pm on 8 May some policemen parked their vehicle outside the restaurant and went inside to eat. A few minutes later a large car bomb parked beside the police car blew up and destroyed the Samad, killing seven people and wounding a further 19. The explosion caused a massive traffic jam. Ambulances and the fire brigade could not get through and the building beside the Samad caught fire and burned to the ground. Though the Iraqi government is claiming that al Qa'ida has been driven from Baghdad and Anbar province to the east, this is not really true. In January I went to see Colonel Ismail Zubaie, the police chief of Fallujah, who was a former insurgent fighting al-Qa'ida who had cut his brother's throat. He seemed to be in full control of Fallujah. But in May fighters from al Qa'ida confronted Colonel Ismail's uncle, who was a teacher, and shot him dead. The next day they sent a suicide bomber to blow up the tent where his relatives were receiving mourners. The operation, clearly an elaborate attempt to kill Colonel Ismail, shows that al Qa'ida remains well organized and with agents everywhere in the Sunni community.

The Americans lost only 21 soldiers killed in Iraq in May which are the lowest monthly casualties since February 2004. But these do not mean that the chief Republican contender senator John McCain is correct in believing that with enough resolution the American army is on the road to victory. Paradoxically, the Americans are now benefiting from their failure to turn Iraq into a virtual American colony in 2003-4. Iran and Syria no longer fear, as they once did, that as soon as the US had gained complete control of Iraq it would try to overthrow their governments. There may be those in the White House who still privately dream of doing just that, but Iraq's neighbors no longer feel they must destabilize Iraq in order to avert the American threat to themselves. American casualties are also down because the Sunni Arab and the Shia Arab communities in Iraq are not only divided but fighting low level civil wars. Part of the old anti- American Sunni resistance has turned on al Qa'ida and allied itself to the Americans. The Sunni were driven out of most of Baghdad by the Shia militias in the sectarian civil war of 2006-7 and are increasingly marginalized. Among the Shia, once known for their impressive unity after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, internecine battles between the Shia parties in government and the Sadrists have become bloodier and more frequent.

The main supporters of Nouri al-Maliki's government are the US and Iran. This has never been admitted by Washington but from the Iranian point of view the present Shia-Kurdish government in Baghdad is as good as it is going to get. It does not want to overthrow Maliki, but it does want to reduce American influence on him. The fighting in Basra and Sadr City between the Mehdi Army and the Iraqi government backed by the American army between March and April was in each case brought to an end by Iranian mediation. This has become very public. To arrange the ceasefires in Basra and Baghdad President Jalal Talabani twice went to see Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Quds brigade of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard on the Iraq-Iran border, though President Bush has denounced the Quds brigade as terrorists orchestrating attacks on US forces in Iraq. Iranian influence in Iraq is stronger than

ever and the Iranians are increasingly willing to flaunt it. When the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad visited Baghdad this year his visit was announced in advance and he drove through the city by car. When President George W Bush comes to Baghdad it is kept a secret until the last moment, he moves only by helicopter and he has never ventured outside the Green Zone.

Suppose Barack Obama wins the US presidential election America could withdraw its forces from Iraq over the next eighteen months without provoking an explosion of violence but only if it first had an agreement with Iran and Syria. An increase in Iranian influence in Iraq has been inevitable since 2003. Once the US had decided to overthrow Saddam Hussein the beneficiaries were always going to be the Shia religious parties, because they represented the majority of Iraqis, and they would be supported by Iran. Many of America's problems in Iraq over the last five years have happened because Washington believed it could prevent or dilute the triumph of Iran and the Shia in Iraq.

Iranian strategy in Iraq is to keep the pot boiling but not over-boiling. They do not want the present government displaced. "The Iranians are very good at creating crises in Iraq and then solving them," one Kurdish leader told me. Iran wants a weak Iraq, incapable of posing a threat to Tehran, and allied to itself. It wants a Shia government in power in Baghdad and the Americans out. "The three great powers of the Gulf historically are Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia," the same Kurdish leader told me. "If Iran and Iraq act together then they will dominate the Gulf." It may not be as easy as that. The Iraqis like the Iranians no more than they do the Americans. Muqtada al-Sadr, who is calling for an American withdrawal, has always been an Iraqi nationalist as suspicious of Iran as of the US. Paradoxically, the Shia governing parties in Baghdad, ISCI and Dawa, have traditionally had closer links with Iran than the Sadrists. ISCI was founded by the Iranians in Tehran in 1982 to be their puppet if they succeeded in defeating Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war. It is still heavily influenced by them, but at the end of the day neither ISCI nor the Sadrists want the Americans nor the Iranians to treat Iraq as a client state.

Probably the most astute politician in Iraq is Muqtada al-Sadr, who has chosen not to tell his militiamen to fight for the enclaves they controlled in Basra and Baghdad. Instead in the last days of May he called tens of thousands of his followers into the streets to protest against the a new bilateral pact between the US and Iraq that is being secretly negotiated and would govern the future political, military and economic relationship between Washington and Baghdad. "Why do they want to break the backbone of Iraq?" asked Sheikh Mohammed al-Gharrawi addressing crowds in Sadr City. "The agreement wants to put an American in each house. This agreement is poison mixed in poison, not poison in honey because there is no honey at all."

This opposition to the occupation can only grow if Senator McCain wins the US presidential election and tries to win an outright military victory in Iraq. The US can only stay in Iraq so long as it is allied to a large part of the Sunni or Shia communities. The occupation has always depended on 'divide and rule'. If the US is ever faced with a united opposition by both Shia and Sunni in Iraq then it will have to leave. Everybody in Iraq overplays their hand at one time or other. The US position in Iraq has slightly improved over the last year but the improvement is limited. But by trying to impose a security pact on Iraq that would turn Iraq into a client state the Washington is fueling a fresh insurgency. It is discrediting the Iraqi government and the ruling parties who will be seen as foreign pawns. If McCain wins the presidential election and tries to put the security agreement into operation then neither the occupation nor the resistance to it will end.

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