

Petraeus Hid Maliki Resistance to US Troops in Basra

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WASHINGTON, Apr 17 (IPS) - In testimony before Congressional committees last week, Gen. David Petraeus portrayed Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's late March offensive in Basra as a poorly planned effort that departed from what U.S. officials had expected.

What Petraeus did not reveal is that al-Maliki was deliberately upsetting a Petraeus plan to put U.S. and British forces into Basra for a months-long operation to eliminate the Mahdi Army from the city.

Petraeus referred to a plan for an operation to be carried out in Basra that he and his staff had developed with the head of the Basra Operational Command, Gen. Mohan al-Furayji. But Petraeus carefully dodged a question from Sen. Hillary Clinton about what resources he was planning to deploy to Basra and over what length of time.

Clinton evidently suspected that the plan envisioned the deployment of U.S. troops on a large scale in the Shiite south, despite the fact that the Iraqi government is supposed to be responsible for security there. Petraeus responded vaguely that it was "a phased plan over the course of a number of months during which different actions were going to be pursued."

Reports in the British press indicated, however, that the campaign plan was based on the assumption that British and U.S. troops would play the central role in an effort to roll up the Mahdi Army in Basra. The Independent reported Mar. 21 that Gen. Furayji had publicly declared there would be a "final battle" in Basra, probably during the summer, and that Britain had already promised to provide military forces for the campaign. It quoted "senior government sources" as saying that Prime Minister Gordon Brown's earlier pledge to cut the number of British troops in the south from 4,100 to 2,500 would "almost certainly be postponed until at least the end of the year".

Two days later, the Sunday Mirror quoted a "senior U.S. military source" as saying that the "coalition" would turn its attention to Basra once the "huge operation" in Mosul against al Qaeda and nationalist Sunni insurgents was completed, and that the U.S. was prepared to redeploy "thousands" of U.S. marines to Basra, if necessary.

This plan for a major foreign troop deployment to the south for the first time since the U.S. battles against the Mahdi Army in April 2004 did not sit well with al-Maliki. In 2006 and 2007, he had repeatedly blocked U.S. proposals that U.S. and Iraqi forces target Moqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army in Baghdad as well as in the south.

When Vice President Dick Cheney, who had previously played the “bad cop” in the George W. Bush administration’s relations with al-Maliki, visited Baghdad in mid-March, one of his objectives was to get al-Maliki to go along with the Petraeus plan to eliminate the commanding position of Sadr’s forces in Basra. Al-Maliki has told Iraqi officials that Cheney put pressure on him to go along with the Basra operation, according one Iraqi source.

After Cheney met briefly with al-Maliki Mar. 17, he discussed the “security situation” with Sadr’s Shiite rival, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, head of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, which has been pushing for the destruction of the Mahdi Army. Cheney lavished praise on Hakim, whom he ostentatiously called “my friend”, for “working so hard with the United States and with Iraq’s other leaders to advance the cause of Iraq’s freedom and democracy.” The signal of the Bush administration’s intentions toward Sadr could hardly have been clearer.

The Cheney visit apparently mobilised al-Maliki, but not in the way Cheney had intended.

Four days later, when Petraeus met with al-Maliki’s national security adviser Mowaffak al-Rubaie to talk about the U.S. campaign plan for Basra, al-Rubaie warned Petraeus that al-Maliki had a different plan. Petraeus was apparently told that the operation would last from a week to 10 days — not the several months envisioned in the Petraeus plan.

The main point of al-Maliki’s operation, however, was that it would exclude U.S. troops. As al-Maliki explained in an interview with CNN correspondent Nic Robertson Apr. 7, he had demanded that U.S. and British troops stay out of Basra, “because that would give an excuse to some militant groups to say that this is a foreign force attacking us.”

al-Maliki thus feared that a confrontation between thousands of U.S. and British troops and the Mahdi Army would further inflame the feelings of Shiites in the south about the occupation, with which his own regime has been so tightly linked.

The Shiite south has become the most anti-occupation region in the country. The British polling firm ORB, which has been doing opinion surveys in Iraq since 2005, found in March that 69 percent of respondents in the south believed security would improve if foreign troops were withdrawn, and only 10 percent believed it would get worse.

When al-Maliki met with Petraeus the following morning, according to Petraeus’s spokesman, Petraeus warned against sending “a couple of brigades” into the city, suggesting that he did not consider the scale of the operation to be large enough. Nevertheless, when al-Maliki told him the decision to launch an operation in Basra had already been made and that it would begin in three days, Petraeus agreed to support it.

When the Basra operation became an obvious disaster, however, Washington officials began to question al-Maliki’s motives. On the third day of the operation, as Bush administration officials were reassessing what they described as “a rapidly deteriorating situation in southern Iraq”, one official told the Washington Post’s Peter Baker they were comparing conspiracy theories about why al-Maliki had acted so precipitously.

Although that comment was not explained, it clearly implied that al-Maliki was deliberately undermining the U.S. objective of eliminating the Mahdi Army by using U.S. and British troops.

Bush administration suspicions of al-Maliki’s intentions could not have been eased by the fact that a delegation of pro-government parties traveled to Iran to ask the commander of

the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to negotiate a ceasefire with the Mahdi Army. That ploy move, which did result in a tenuous ceasefire, raised the possibility that al-Maliki intended from the beginning that the outcome of the Basra operation would be a new agreement that would prevent the deployment of U.S. and British troops to fight the Mahdi Army during the summer.

Bush administration officials have been asserting that the most important thing about the Basra operation is that al-Maliki is now convinced that Iran is really an enemy rather than a friend. But al-Maliki's Apr. 7 interview with CNN's Robertson made it clear that he has not budged from his position that his government's interests lie in an accord between Iran and the United States — not in taking sides against Iran.

"We will always reject the idea of any side using Iraq as a launching pad for its attack on others," said al-Maliki. "We reject Iran using Iraq to attack the U.S., and at the same time we reject the idea of the U.S. using Iraq to attack Iran..."

Gareth Porter is an historian and national security policy analyst. The paperback edition of his latest book, "Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam", was published in 2006.

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