

Skewed reporting from the Iraq War Theater. Basra Battles: Barely Half the Story

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When it comes to Iraq, reporters appear intent on omitting or fabricating news.

The latest battles in Basra, Iraq's second largest city and a vital oil seaport, furnished ample instances of misleading and manipulative practice in corporate journalism today. One commonly used tactic is to describe events using self-styled or "official" terminology, which deliberately confuses the reader by giving no real indication or analysis of what is actually happening.

Regardless of the outcome of the fighting that commenced upon the Iraqi army's march to Basra 24 March, and which proved disastrous for Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, we have been repeatedly "informed" of highly questionable assumptions. Most prominent amongst them is that the "firebrand" and "radical" Moqtada Al-Sadr — leader of the millions-strong Shia Sadr Movement — led a group of "renegades", "thugs" and "criminals" to terrorise the strategically important city. Naturally, Al-Maliki is portrayed as the exact opposite of Al-Sadr. When the former descended on Basra with his 40,000-strong US- trained and equipped legions, we were circuitously told that the long-awaited move was cause for celebration. The media also suggested we had no reason to doubt Al-Maliki's intentions when he promised to restore "law and order" and "cleanse" the city, or to question his determination when he described the Basra crusade as "a fight to the end". If anyone was still unsure of Al-Maliki's noble objectives they could be reassured by the Bush administration's repeated verbal backings, one of which described the Basra battle as "a defining moment".

Indeed.

Reporters parroted such assumptions with little scrutiny. Even thorough journalists seemed oblivious to the known facts: that the Iraqi army largely consists of Shia militias affiliated with a major US ally in Iraq, Abdul-Aziz Al-Hakim and his Supreme Islamic Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI); that the SCIRI's Al-Badr militias have rained terror on the Iraqi people — mostly Sunnis, but increasingly Shias as well — for years; that the Sadr movement and SCIRI are in fierce contest for control of Iraq's southern provinces, and that the US allies are losing ground quickly to the Sadr Movement, which might cost them the upcoming provincial elections scheduled for October 1, 2008; that the US wanted to see the defeat and demise of Sadr supporters before that crucial date because a victory for Sadr is tantamount to the collapse of the entire American project predicated on the need to privatise Iraqi oil and bring about a "soft" partitioning of the country.

Al-Hakim is pushing for what is being termed a super Shia province with its centre in Basra; Sadr is demanding a unified Iraq with a strong central government. Al-Hakim wishes to see a

permanent American presence in the country; Sadr insists on a short timetable for withdrawal. The US's major quandary is that Sadr reflects the views of most Iraqis. His possible victory in the south in fair elections could position him as the new nationalist leader, and a unifying force for Iraqis.

What we are rarely told is that Al-Maliki, although prime minister, is helpless without the validation of Al-Hakim. The latter's SCIRI is the main party in the ruling bloc in the Iraqi parliament. Al-Maliki's own Daawa Party is smaller and much less popular. In order for the coalition to survive another term, Sadr needed to suffer a major and humiliating defeat. Indeed, it was a "defining moment", but the "criminal gangs" of Basra — and Najaf, Karbala, Diwaniyah, Kut and Hillah — have proven much stronger than the seemingly legitimate Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and their Al-Badr militias. Even the atrocious US bombardment of Basra proved of little value, despite many civilian deaths. More, the additional thousands of recruits shoved into the battlefield — tribal gunmen lured by promises of money and power by Al-Maliki — also made little difference. News analysts concluded that the strength of the "criminal gangs" was underestimated, thus someone had to be blamed.

First, Al-Maliki was blamed for acting alone without consulting with the US government. Even presidential candidate John McCain jumped at the opportunity to chastise Bush's man in Iraq for supposedly acting on his own behest. US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker was quoted in the April 3 New York Times as saying, "the sense we had was that this would be a long-term effort: increased pressure gradually squeezing the Special Groups." Really? Would the US allow Al-Maliki to execute a "long-term effort" — which is costly financially, politically and militarily — without its full consent, if not orders?

Second, blame was shifted onto Iran. The media parroted these accusations again with palpable omissions. It is true that Sadr is backed by Iran. It is partly true that he is serving an Iranian agenda. But what is conveniently forgotten is that Iran's strongest ally in Iraq is Al-Hakim's SCIRI, and that the central government in Baghdad considers Tehran a friend and ally. Indeed, it was pressure from the latter that weakened Al-Maliki's resolve in a matter of days. On March 24, Al-Maliki announced his "fight to the end", and on April 4 he ordered a halt to the fighting and compensation for the families of the "martyrs". What took place during this short window of time is an Iran-brokered agreement.

Naturally, skewed reporting leads to slanted conclusions. No, the lesson learnt is not that the Iraqi army requires more training and funds, which would necessitate the US and other forces to prolong their stay in the country. It is rather that the tide has turned so fast in Iraq, whereby the new enemy is now largely Shia, and one which envisions a unified and free Iraq which controls its own resources; that Iran's influence in Iraq has morphed to the point of guaranteeing a win-win situation, while the US is playing with a lot fewer cards; that US firepower has proven less effective than ever, and that the upcoming elections could create a nightmare scenario whose consequences could remove the sectarian label from Iraqi violence and replace it with a nationalist one.

Reporters can be quisling, incompetent and parrots of official accounts. Regardless, no matter how they wish to term it, the battle of Basra is likely to change the nature of the US fight in Iraq for years to come.

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