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# Teaching Notes for CHAPTER 5: Basra: Strategic Dilemmas and Escalation of Force Options

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## TEACHING NOTES

### Basra: Strategic Dilemmas and Escalation of Force Options

John Hodgson\*

The events in Basra in the spring of 2003 illustrate a “hybrid” conflict with elements of conventional and unconventional warfare: humanitarian assistance, managing IDPs, security operations with multiple state and nonstate actors, all occurring simultaneously in the same geographic area and period of time. In that regard, the situation in Basra in late March and early April 2003 presented a worst-case scenario both for military commanders and civilian leadership. Thus, this case represents a challenging test-bed, a vehicle for students to discuss the dilemmas and issues facing the key actors and decision-makers, and to develop a plan—including aspects of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare—with the benefit of hindsight, to bring the situation to an acceptable conclusion quickly and efficiently.

The purpose of this case is to explore the military and reconstruction options available to the British in the early stages of the Basra operation. However, it is interesting to ask the question: If the British had pursued civil-based options in late March and early April in Basra, would the experience of the subsequent years have worked out differently? The purpose *is not* to discuss the legitimacy of the Iraq War, the British involvement therein, or the decisions, largely American, in the early planning stages of the war. As tempting as it will be for some students to engage in those discussions, the instructor should steer students away from those arguments and focus on the problems facing the British at Basra. The instructor should discuss U.S. and UK national interests and coalition strategic objectives in an earlier class and, more importantly, should emphasize to students that they are role-playing military leaders in this case study. They have been given a job to do and must objectively identify and address the critical issues with the resources available.

#### Questions for Discussion:

1. The initial questions, as with all case studies, should provide the students an opportunity to frame the case,
  - What is the case about?
  - Who are the major actors?
  - What are their interests?
  - What are their challenges/problems?

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2. As the British faced Basra, what were some of the challenges they faced?
  - What are the British operational objectives?
  - What were the key planning assumptions?
  - What is the priority/what are the essential tasks?
  - According to the plan, what is the British sustained involvement to be in postwar Iraq?
3. Ideally, the students will focus on the issues facing Major General Robin Brims and his 1st Armored Division. As discussed above, the purpose of this case study is to provide a venue for the students to develop a plan to solve the array of challenges, i.e., what are the issues, and how do you address them? The events suggest that Brims faced two key decision points that allow the instructor to focus and/or segment the discussion:
  - a. The primary decision point occurred on or about March 24 and 25, 2003. The 1st Armored Division had accomplished its initial objectives, had arrived at Basra, and had paused to survey and assess the situation. At that point, Brims and his subordinate commanders, as the opening quote alluded to, began to realize the enormity of the challenges in Basra. Yet, they were urged to release the 7th Armored Brigade to join the efforts in the march to Bagdad. The two-week pause between March 24 and April 6 illuminated the strategic, operational, and tactical differences in opinion on how to proceed between the Americans and the British. Events during that period caused some to realize the fault of key planning assumptions, i.e., a mass Shia uprising and the stability of the local civilian administration.

Questions include:

- Should Brims release the 7th Armored Brigade?
- What are the major challenges/problems? In what order do you prioritize them?
- How do you solve/address those challenges?

Some of the “shaping of the battlefield” tasks that Brims executed, such as surgical air and artillery strikes, reconnaissance and intelligence operations, and information and psychological operations (loudspeakers and leaflets), that may not be obvious to the civilian student are provided. A learning objective of this case is that in “hybrid” warfare, *how* the expeditionary force accomplishes its mission is as important as or more important than *what* it does. For example, if the students identify the need to screen the displaced civilians for *fedayeen* and/or deserting Iraqi soldiers, how will they determine if a person is a threat or not? What resources do you allocate to accomplish that task? At the expense of what other requirements?

- b. The second decision point that Brims faced occurred on April 7, 2003, at the transition from combat operations to stability and reconstruction. The British seized the *fedayeen* stronghold in the College of Literature and effectively ended large-scale resistance within the city and surrounding regions. Some sections of the city showed evidence of urban combat, but the vast majority of the homes remained unscathed. Widespread looting, a lack of services (e.g., water, electricity) and other civil disorder disproved the assumption that local authority would remain intact. The British recognized the transition and reconstruction needs but were not resourced nor mandated to fill them. This case, therefore, may also be used to highlight the challenges in the transition from major combat operations to stability and reconstruction operations (in the context of “hybrid” warfare).

Questions include:

- What are the major challenges/problems?
- In what priority?
- What resources are available?
- How do you solve the challenges/problems?

The instructor must again emphasize that for recommended solutions to each identified challenge or problem, it is important that the students specifically address *how* the solution will be accomplished and estimate the second- and third-order effects of each. For example, if students identify the need to create a city/regional police force, who will they hire and train? How will they screen applicants? Who will train them? How will they be resourced? If they recommend reinstating the Hussein-era local authorities, how will the residents react? If they recommend creating a new force based on a quota system, how will they integrate the members in a nonsectarian manner in a society rooted in sectarian and tribal division?

4. While students in political science and international relations likely will focus on the dilemmas facing the British at the political and strategic level, students in a military history and professional military education venue likely will focus on the operational and tactical tasks. A more focused class also could discuss specifically the variety of lethal and nonlethal force options available to deal with the tactical problems. Many technologies are available to separate combatants from noncombatants and to control crowds, for example, in order to provide additional space and time for soldiers to make better decisions and mitigate collateral damage and other unintended consequences. The case study, “The British and the Iraqis in Basra in 2003,” in David Koplow, *Non-Lethal Weapons; the Law and Policy of Revolutionary Technologies for the Military and Law Enforcement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) is better suited for a discussion on the use of specific nonlethal weapons in this scenario. The insert, “Escalation of Force Options; Shout, Shoot, or Run Away,” is intended as a point of

departure for both a general discussion of nonlethal weapons within the framework of the overall Basra strategic dilemmas or the decision to employ these weapons in Basra or not.

Discussion questions include:

- Strategic implications: Will nonlethal weapons help or hinder the mission? Will they add to or detract from the perceived legitimacy of the operation? How will they affect international opinion?
  - International treaties: The United States and the United Kingdom interpret the Chemical Warfare Convention differently (the United States authorizes the use of tear gas in specific situations). In coalition warfare, how do you resolve those differences?
  - Capabilities: If you were a British soldier, what nonlethal capabilities would you want to have?
  - Personnel/training: As a commander, into whose hands do you entrust nonlethal weapons?
  - Legal/ethical: As a commander, what rules of engagement criteria or other instructions regarding lethal and nonlethal capabilities do you give your soldiers?
  - Strategic communications and information operations: What information about your nonlethal weapons do you provide to the citizens of Basra?
  - Logistics: You cannot bring everything. What capabilities do you leave behind in order to allow space for nonlethal weapons, their ammunition, and their associated equipment?
5. This case may also be presented as a planning scenario. Professional military education students will be experts in military planning processes and techniques, but undergraduate and graduate students could benefit from this teaching method as well. While it would be cumbersome for those students to become familiar with Field Manual 5.0, *Army Planning and Orders Production*, and Joint Publication 5.0, *Joint Operation Planning*, a review of applicable publications such as the Mass Atrocity Response Operations Project's *Military Planning Guide* may be useful for civilian students to augment a simple problem-solving outline (define the problem, list assumptions, identify resources, explore options).
6. The takeaway of this scenario is to highlight the complexity and difficulties of military and political operations in a "hybrid" environment. It is not to debate the legitimacy of the Iraq War overall, dwell on planning failures, nor critique the British conduct, although some of those points, if focused, can further demonstrate the challenges of hybrid conflict. Rather, the case study challenges students to face the daunting task of identifying, prioritizing, and addressing issues in the most challenging of environments. As a worst-case scenario, the lesson of this class is that there are no right answers, only a series of choices, of which the long-lasting effects are unknown.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

- This case was inspired and informed in part by the *Frontline* documentary, “The Invasion of Iraq,” (PBS, Richard Sanders and Jeff Goldberg, February 26, 2004). Clips from the program are therefore particularly suitable for student preparation and/or to begin the class. The video and supporting website, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/invasion/cron/>, include interviews with civilian and military leaders, soldiers, Iraqi residents, military commanders, and *fedayeen*, maps, a timeline of events, and analyses.
- Williamson Murray and Robert Scales, *The Iraq War; a Military History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), is an exceptional resource, particularly pp. 129-153, “The British War in the South,” and the detailed maps in the inserts after p. 88 and p. 152.
- For an introduction to the concept of “hybrid” warfare, see, for example, Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (1st Qtr. 2009): 34-39. [http://www.potomac institute.org/media/medioclips/2009/Hoffman\\_JFO\\_109.pdf](http://www.potomac institute.org/media/medioclips/2009/Hoffman_JFO_109.pdf), Charles Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal; Leadership in a Three Block War,” *Marines* (January 1999), [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic\\_corporal.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm).
- For a history of Basra in the modern era, focusing on the issue of popular uprising and revolt, see Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State; Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Munster: Lit Verlag, 2005).
- For a discussion of possible nonlethal force options specific to the Basra situation, see David Koplow, *Non-Lethal Weapons; the Law and Policy of Revolutionary Technologies for the Military and Law Enforcement* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 113-128, “The British and the Iraqis in Basra in 2003.” For a summary of current nonlethal technologies, see National Research Council, *An Assessment of Non-Lethal Weapons Science and Technologies* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2003).
- For planning references, see *Mass Atrocity Response Operations (MARO) Military Planning Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Kennedy School, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, and the Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army Peacekeeping & Stability Operations Institute, 2010), available at [http://www.pksoi.org/document\\_repository/Handbook%20or%20Guide/MARO%20Planning%20Handbook\\_Index ed-CDR-379.pdf](http://www.pksoi.org/document_repository/Handbook%20or%20Guide/MARO%20Planning%20Handbook_Index%20ed-CDR-379.pdf).
- For a first-hand account of the events and challenges in Basra after the end of major combat operations, see Hilary Synnott, *Bad Days in Basra; My Turbulent Time as Britain’s Man in Southern Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008).