

THE QUEEN'S "TRIBE" IS LEAVING IRAQ

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In October of 2006 British Lt. Col. Simon Brown made a most insightful statement about the foreign occupation of Iraq: "We are in a tribal society in Basra and we are in effect one of these tribes. As long as we are here the others will attack us because we are the most influential tribe."

At first British forces appeared to have much more success than their American coalition partners in the North and West. They were welcomed as liberators by the large Shiite majority, who had been horribly oppressed by Saddam Hussein.

Early on British soldiers were able to patrol the streets without helmets and flack jackets. Some of them even went fishing on their days off. Lucky for them, the Brits did not have to contend with the Sunni insurgency, which continues unabated in Baghdad and Anbar Province.

But now Basra, the second largest city in Iraq, has been taken over by competing Shiite militias. The British are holed up in their bases, patrolling less frequently, and they are taking more and more casualties. Last January the British Consulate was evacuated because of mortar attacks, the general accuracy of which is improving weekly.

Some believe that the militants have received training from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, a force that reports directly to Iran's top cleric. The Iranian border is only a short distance away, and arms and ammunition are pouring in from the only Shiite majority country in the world.

There are as many as 20 different armed groups in Basra, the dominant ones being the Badr Brigades and Moktada al-Sadr's Madhi Army. The city's police force has been thoroughly infiltrated by the militias. The police are so corrupt that the Brits have been forced to destroy many of Basra's police stations.

Some of these militants have attacked women who are unchaperoned or whom they believed are not clothed properly. One witness said that "British forces were just

watching all of this. They let the militias destroy the rule of law here." A human rights activist complained that the British "handed the city to the Islamist groups as a gift."

Both Christians and Sunnis have been driven out of the city with the percentage of Sunnis in Basra falling from 40 to 14 percent. As he announced the departure of 2,500 British troops within 6 months and the remaining 6,000 by the end of 2008, Prime Minister Tony Blair conceded that the situation in Basra was not "how we wanted it to be."

The Brits will eventually hand over all their bases to Iraq's 10th Division, but these badly trained and poorly motivated soldiers might very well be overrun by the militias. When an outpost in Amara was handed over to the Iraqis in August, 2006, it was looted and made unusable within 48 hours.

Some of the reconstruction projects in Southern Iraq have been successes. Much of the marsh land that Saddam Hussein had drained to drive out the Marsh Arabs has been partially restored. A new sewage system now serves 40 percent of Basra, much higher than before the war. But running water is not available for days on end, and none of it is safe to drink. Basra produces enough electrical power for itself, but it must send most of it north to Baghdad, leaving the city with four hours of electricity a day.

The most celebrated project was one in which Laura Bush was involved. A children's hospital that was supposed to cost \$50 million has now more than tripled in price and it is still not finished. The American contractors blame Iraqi workers, and Iraqi officials blame the early Coalition Provisional Authority for firing all the engineers and managers who used to work for Saddam.

Just as it has been for Bush, Blair's Iraq policies have divided his party and his country. In 2001 Blair, a popular centrist who was called Britain's Bill Clinton, won 458 seats in the 633-seat Parliament. In the 2005 election Labor lost 105 of those seats, primarily because of Blair's friendship with Bush and his Iraq policies. Now the Conservatives are leading Labor by 13 points in the polls.

Blair's decision to withdraw from Iraq was, however, only partially political, because his military advisors have told him that British forces are overextended and poorly

equipped. Many of the British troops who are leaving Iraq will be redeployed in Afghanistan where there is still hope for some sort of victory. The Queen's tribe in Iraq has not been defeated militarily, but, in the words of Anthony Cordesman, the world's leading expert on Iraq, they "lost long ago in the political sense."