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Warren Anthony Chin 

Rabdan Academy, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

wchin@ra.ac.ae

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the challenges of command in counterinsurgency through the British experience in Basra, Iraq (2006–2007). It argues that command is shaped less by individual leaders than by structural and temporal constraints inherent in the strategic culture of liberal states. Using a qualitative case study and the conceptual lenses of “wartime” and “high modern utopianism,” the paper analyses command during Operation Sinbad. The analysis finds that a temporal paradox—pitting the long-term requirements of insurgency against short-term political timelines—fundamentally undermined the mission. This contradiction led to resource shortfalls and institutional fragmentation that crippled the “comprehensive approach”. The paper concludes that tactical actions, however skilful, cannot overcome the institutional pathologies defining how Western states prosecute such wars.

KEYWORDS: Command, counterinsurgency, British Army, Iraq War, Operation Sinbad, military leadership, strategic studies

RESUMEN. Este artículo examina los desafíos del mando en la contrainsurgencia a través de la experiencia británica en Basora, Irak (2006-2007). Argumenta que el mando se configura menos por líderes individuales que por restricciones estructurales y temporales inherentes a la cultura estratégica de los estados liberales. Utilizando un estudio de caso cualitativo y las perspectivas conceptuales de “tiempo de guerra” y “utopismo moderno”, el artículo analiza el mando durante la Operación Simbad. El estudio encuentra que una paradoja temporal —la oposición de los requisitos a largo plazo de la insurgencia con los plazos políticos a corto plazo— socavó fundamentalmente la misión. Esta contradicción condujo a la escasez de recursos y a la fragmentación institucional que paralizó un “enfoque integral”. El artículo concluye que las acciones tácticas, por hábiles que sean, no pueden superar las patologías institucionales que definen cómo los estados occidentales llevan a cabo tales guerras.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Contrainsurgencia, Ejército Británico, estudios estratégicos, guerra de Irak, liderazgo militar, mando, operación Simbad

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CONTACT: Warren Anthony Chin ✉ wchin@ra.ac.ae

Introduction

This article examines the systemic challenges Western states face in prosecuting counterinsurgency, but it does so through the concept of command. The British military defines command as “the authority vested in an individual of [the] Armed Forces for directing, coordinating and controlling military forces” (UK Ministry of Defence, 2022, p. 18). The successful application of command relies on more than merely the legal title of the commander, and one of the principal purposes of the paper is to explore what these are. This is highlighted by the atypical demands of counterinsurgency, which is defined as “those military, law enforcement, political, economic, psychological and civic actions taken to defeat insurgency, while addressing the root causes” (British Army, 2009, pp. 1–6). As a multi-faceted strategy, it is presumed that the commander requires an equally wide-ranging set of skills. I examine this aspect of command through the British experience in Iraq during Operation Sinbad (2006–2007) under Major General Richard Shirreff, General Officer Commanding (GOC) Multi-National Division South-East (MND-SE).

Much has been written on the role of command during the British occupation of Iraq (Elliott, 2014; Ledwidge, 2011; The Iraq Inquiry, 2016a). However, rather than revisiting the well-worn “lions led by donkeys” narrative, which largely blames politicians and military commanders for failure, this analysis foregrounds structural and temporal constraints that shape decision-making. It argues that effective command in counterinsurgency cannot be understood solely in terms of leadership traits or tactical choices. Instead, command is constituted through its environment: a field of friction between military objectives, political priorities, coalition dynamics, and host-nation politics.

In undertaking this task, I use two constructs to illustrate the contemporary problems facing command within the realm of counterinsurgency. The first utilises Rynning, Schmitt, and Theussen’s framework of “wartime”—a Western institutional and cultural paradigm governing the conduct of war. The second framework is MacKay’s concept of “high modern utopianism,” which describes counterinsurgency not merely as military stabilisation, but as an ideologically driven project of social transformation. Both paradigms highlight a core contradiction: although counterinsurgency demands time, flexibility, and local adaptation, Western commanders are pressured to deliver quick, demonstrable results within a compressed political calendar. This temporal paradox—between the long war of insurgency and the short attention span of liberal politics—is one of the defining constraints on command today (MacKay, 2023).

The concentration on a single commander and a single operation might seem odd, but such a narrow focus highlights the constraints imposed on them by the temporal paradox highlighted above. One might also ask if observation of a divisional commander, which is historically deemed to be a tactical position, is the most appropriate focal point for such a discussion. For example, Milan Vego argues that wars are not won or lost at the tactical level

but at the operational and strategic levels of war (Vego, 2015). I do not contest this point but believe the divisional commander in MND-SE enjoyed a greater freedom than one would typically expect in a military chain of command, and this allowed them to step beyond the tactical level of war.

Two drivers were in play here, which reinforced command autonomy. First, American theatre and corps headquarters were primarily focused on dealing with the insurgency in their zone of occupation and had little time to worry about MND-SE. This was particularly true in 2006 when the U.S. was seriously thinking about withdrawing from Iraq, which seemed to be descending into outright civil war. Second, benign neglect also characterised the relationship between MND-SE and the United Kingdom (UK) government in London. As one commander noted, there was no clear policy guidance or direction and that gave him the freedom to exercise greater influence over the operational environment than implied by his rank. As he explained:

As the senior deployed British commander in Basra – a tactical position which should have simply been executing orders – it fell to me to take on responsibility for generating a strategic plan around which Coalition effort could cohere in my area of operations. My hope in so doing was to create a long-term campaign approach (Shaw, 2013, p. 176).

While there were more senior British officers within Iraq, they were attached to the U.S. military headquarters in Baghdad and exerted little influence over what happened in MND-SE. They also had little or no interaction with the UK's principal military headquarters, the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ). For its part, while PJHQ imposed limits on the commander's freedom to act, but it offered no plan. This left a vacuum that each commander of MND-SE filled with their tactical plan, and this, sometimes, strayed into the operational and strategic levels of war.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I examine the conceptual debates surrounding the uniqueness of counterinsurgency and the evolving nature of command. Second, I trace the strategic context of Iraq in 2006, and the constraints placed upon Shirreff's operational autonomy. The remaining two sections address a question posed by a senior British commander who set a simple but profound question: What are generals for – and if you did not have them, would you invent them? (Rollo, 2013). His response to his question was that: "Generalship ought to be about making plans and providing leadership in their execution, I think in that order" (Rollo, 2013, p. 181).

Following this guidance, I focus on these two domains in highlighting the contemporary challenges facing command. To this end, I reconstruct the planning process of Operation Sinbad and then analyse its implementation. In doing so, I highlight the obstacles encountered across the military, political, and civil domains. Finally, I reflect on what this case reveals about the evolving character of command in liberal counterinsurgency warfare.

Theoretical Frameworks for Counterinsurgency Command

The concept of wartime makes a direct connection between the notions of Western culture and, more specifically, the idea of a Western way of war (Hanson, 2009). Within this context, the West is defined as an “institutional practice of military power directed primarily by liberal governments and societies” (Rynning et al., 2021, p. 2). Two aspects of this debate connect to the question of command in counterinsurgency.

First, they assert that the military decline of the West is not because of the loss of military muscle, but the inability of the government and the institutions of the state to offer strategic leadership and control over military force. A problem that has surfaced repeatedly is that Western governments lack the ability and skill to articulate a clear politico-military strategy. As a result, it proves almost impossible to create an information campaign justifying the prosecution of the war to the electorate or international public opinion (Rynning et al., 2021, p. 7).

It is possible to challenge this observation, and a powerful counterpoint is provided in Elliot Cohen’s *Supreme Command*, a tome which demonstrates civilian democratic government doing precisely that – providing strong strategic guidance to the military during a time of war (Cohen, 2002). This variation in the performance of democracy might therefore be explained by looking at the type of war being waged, not simply how liberal values challenge military norms. In addressing this issue, there is a school of thought that asserts that democratic states prove very effective in fighting big wars (Strachan, 2006). Equally important, there is a rich literature on why democratic states lose small wars, and the UK occupation of Iraq fits more comfortably within this setting (Mack, 1975).

The next element of wartime focuses on perceptions of time. They claim that all cultures have a different sense of time. In the case of the West, time is speeding up because of the impact of technology on politics, society, and economics (Virilio, 1986). Most importantly, this increase in tempo, which is defined as “the race, speed and relative rapidity or density of experiences, meanings, perceptions and activities,” is also impacting the domain of war (Rynning et al., 2021, p. 1). This has manifested itself as an obsession with short and decisive operations. In the West, the presumption is that it must be the master of pace (Rynning et al., 2021, p. 9). In sum, the West’s focus on speed drives both policy and military operations. The question here is how has this impacted the commander’s ability to command.

The same internal political dynamics within Western states have also resulted in the emergence of an approach to counterinsurgency that is designed to parallel the temporal dimensions of insurgency, which is protracted, and which works in opposition to the temporal dimension of the wartime paradigm set out above. Most importantly, the nature of this form of war is shaped by its ideological and normative framework based around the ideals of liberal democratic free market capitalism.

According to MacKay, these values and norms in counterinsurgency emerged as a direct response to the ideological and geopolitical challenge posed by communism. It sought

to create an alternative political offering that was both utopian and conservative, preserving the existing world and economic order that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War. He calls this phenomenon high modern utopianism. This reflects a view of the world based on the idea of progress and modernity, principally via the route of Walt Rostow's theory of economic development and liberal democracy for all.

This version of counterinsurgency places a great deal of importance on time as an asset and on the art of politics, as much as it does on the art of war. MacKay presents the war and occupation of Iraq as one of the principal examples of this form of ideological counterinsurgency. Within this context, we witnessed a strategic vision articulated within Washington that sought to rebuild Iraq in its image. Eventually, a military doctrine emerged that sought to provide the means to realize this political vision. This utopianism heavily infiltrated Britain's occupation of southern Iraq. This stemmed from perceived shared values between Britain and the United States in this war. As important was the belief that, as a medium-sized power, Britain was unable to articulate its grand strategy and was forced to fit into America's grand plan of the war on terror (Strachan, 2013, pp. 253–282).

Both wartime and high modern utopianism highlight the importance of politics in counterinsurgency. Consequently, the commander's political acumen is an important skill. However, the emphasis on politics creates a logic that does not sit comfortably within our thinking about war, and consequently, the importance of politics in counterinsurgency is contested. Those who oppose this idea argue that all wars follow the logic captured within the Clausewitzian universe, which focuses more on the use of force, not politics (Porch, 2013). In the case of Porch, he argues that historically this differentiation between conventional and unconventional war was contrived and driven by the personal ambitions of a cabal of senior officers eager to secure additional resources and fame when operating in a strategic context which placed little value on the prosecution of these wars (Porch, 2013, pp. 40–77).

Indeed, if we look at the history of counterinsurgency and the dominant role played by the military in these conflicts, think, for example, of Calwell's study of the British Empire's small wars; these were primarily dominated by military activity, and so the belief that counterinsurgency is merely war by another name was valid. This debate directly informs contemporary scholarship on the practice of command, particularly concerning the concepts of mission command and adaptability in expeditionary campaigns. While doctrine may call for empowered and flexible leadership, research on Western operational cultures in Iraq and Afghanistan suggests a significant gap between theory and practice.

Scholars have noted that institutional pressures, resource constraints, and a culture of risk aversion often inhibit the very adaptability that counterinsurgency demands, leading to a centralized, process-driven reality that undermines the principles of mission command. Therefore, the "temporal paradox" this paper identifies is not merely a political dilemma but is deeply embedded in an operational culture that struggles to reconcile its doctrinal aspirations for flexibility with its institutional inclination for control and rapid, measurable

outcomes. However, this does not negate the claims made by the military or academics today that counterinsurgency is a different form of war operating within a system employing different rules.

Mackay presents a more nuanced view of counterinsurgency that reconciles these two positions. He demonstrates that there are several different forms of counterinsurgency and that in the West, the philosophical foundations of this practice evolved and changed over time. Consequently, it is possible to speak of many types of counterinsurgencies rather than a single paradigm. According to Mackay, the latest evolution, which he argues emerged during the Vietnam War, represents something qualitatively different from previous iterations of this form of war, and this in turn has changed the logic of how force is applied in a counterinsurgency campaign (MacKay, 2023, pp. 42–64).

If we accept this premise, then it is possible to argue that “modern” counterinsurgency does present unique challenges that make this a strange environment for the military commander. The most profound difference between command in the traditional battlespace and command in a counterinsurgency campaign is captured mainly in David Galula’s observation that “a revolutionary war is 20 percent military action and 80 percent political” (Galula, 1964, p. 63).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, single-case study design to conduct an in-depth analysis of command in contemporary counterinsurgency. The case selected is the British-led Operation Sinbad in Basra, Iraq, between 2006 and 2007, under the command of Major General Richard Shirreff. This case was not chosen to be statistically representative but rather because it serves as a powerful illustrative example of the “temporal paradox” that constrains Western commanders. Furthermore, the Divisional Commander in MNDSE operated with a significant degree of autonomy, creating a unique opportunity to analyse decision-making at the nexus of tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war.

The analysis is based on a critical reading of a range of sources, including secondary academic literature on the Iraq War, published memoirs and accounts from senior military leaders involved in the campaign, and official government documents outlining UK strategic objectives. Data from these sources was interpreted through two specific conceptual frameworks. The first is Rynning, Schmitt, and Theussen’s concept of “wartime”, which describes the Western institutional pressure for short, decisive operations. The second is Mackay’s theory of “high modern utopianism,” which defines modern counterinsurgency as an ideologically driven project of societal transformation. Using these frameworks, the study moves beyond a descriptive historical narrative to analyse the underlying structural forces that shaped command decisions and operational outcomes during Operation Sinbad.

Strategic Constraints on Command in MND-SE

In this section, I aim to examine how the broader strategic and operational context influenced Shirreff's ability to devise and implement an effective operational military plan. Indeed, the principal focus of much of the literature on Britain's occupation of Iraq concentrates on the high politics surrounding the campaign. From my perspective, three questions arise here. The first focuses on the scale and ambition of the British occupation of Iraq, specifically, what evidence do we see of a policy shaped by utopian idealism? Second, how did they think they were going to achieve this objective? Finally, how important did the temporal domain of war become as the occupation dragged on, and why?

High Modern Utopianism and MND-SE

In 2006, a Cabinet subcommittee on Iraq described the UK's strategic objective in the following terms:

A democratic, stable, united and law-abiding Iraq, within its present borders, cooperating with the international community, posing no threat to its neighbours or international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing practical, representative and inclusive government for all its people (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016b, p. 63).

The achievement of this objective was based on a hopelessly naïve and optimistic assessment of the state of Iraq before and after the 2003 war, and an important question is why this formally declared goal was not changed when the reality on the ground was revealed as the military occupation got underway. In the case of the British, it seems that in the first year of the occupation, Whitehall endeavoured to realize this aspiration, and they used the means available to them to promote governance via three lines of development. These were the provision of essential government services, the establishment of a functional economy, and the promotion of stability and security (Synnott, 2008, pp. 19–27). These policies operated within a grander design articulated by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) established in summer 2003 and tasked to create a neo liberal state and economy within Iraq (Synnott, 2008, pp. 19–27). Most importantly, the British exercised very little control over this agenda and so did their best to implement this aspirational goal in Multi-National Division South East (MND-SE).

Initially, the UK was able to sustain this policy because the United States invested \$23 billion in the reconstruction of Iraq during the first year of the occupation (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, 2013). The British received a modest \$300-400 million to help their reconstruction plans, which compared favourably with the \$1 billion invested by the British in the first three years of the occupation (Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, 2013). It is also important to note that initially, the British occupation was not opposed by the predominantly Shia population, which welcomed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (Cockburn, 2008). During this “honeymoon,” the British assumed their experience

in past conflicts and peacekeeping operations played an instrumental role in maintaining stability (UK House of Commons Defence Committee, 2004). The problem was that this benign setting allowed the emergence of a business-as-usual mentality within government, and this, in turn, caused strategic drift.

As a result, we lacked a coherent national or grand strategy, which made it impossible to balance ends and means. Circumstances allowed this malaise to persist. So, for example, as time passed, we saw a significant shift in policy after 2004, as first an interim Iraqi government was put in place, which resulted in the removal of the Coalition Provisional Authority (28 June 2004). This was then followed by national elections in 2005, which saw the establishment of a formally constituted and internationally recognized government. In addressing these important political shifts, the UK transferred responsibility for the provision of government services and economic development to the Iraqi state. It restricted itself to enabling the provision of better security.

This limited the UK's financial liability in this nation-building project, and, in this way, it was able to achieve a better balance between ends and means, which allowed it to sustain its public commitment to the transformation of Iraq. Most importantly, it was believed that achieving such an outcome was mainly in the hands of the Iraqis (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016b, p. 63). Implicitly, the scale of ambition did not reduce significantly, but balancing ends and ways within the theatre of operations was achieved by shifting the fiscal onus of this project onto the Iraqis. As a result, circumstances allowed the UK government to believe it was still possible to achieve its mission without looking seriously at the assumptions underlying its strategy.

War Time in MND-SE

We can see elements of wartime in the institutional architecture of British strategy making, the behaviour and actions of the government, and finally the *modus operandi* of the military. Iraq and subsequently Afghanistan are frequently cited as the classic examples of the institutional failure of the British state to create an effective strategy (Newton et al., 2010). The duration of the war on terror ensured these weaknesses became visible to friend and foe. Briefly, it was argued that policy and strategy suffered from short-termism caused by the electoral cycle.

Criticism was also directed at the power of the Prime Minister's Office in shaping policy and strategy, and within this, the existence of a "sofa" government – an exclusive group within the Prime Minister's Office who knew little about war but drove British policy on Iraq. The power of the Prime Minister also extended to the dependence of Secretaries of State on his patronage. Indeed, the political fortunes of top-level ministers relied on how well they ran their departments of state. This produced a highly competitive and stove-piped system of government, which was not conducive to cooperation.

Although technically the Cabinet and its plethora of subcommittees existed to ensure coordination, often these lacked the power and authority to impose control. As a result, even though there was a dedicated cabinet subcommittee on defence and security and one on Iraq, both proved incapable of creating and articulating a clear strategy. The net result was a disconnect between the goals of the war and the ways and means used to wage the war (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2010).

The government was also accused of not being sufficiently engaged in Iraq beyond preserving the special relationship (Elliott, 2014, pp. 108–112). While this observation holds on a general level, it presents a slightly misleading picture. A more accurate depiction of the government's interaction is of an oscillating wave of interest with the government intervening strongly at some moments and demonstrating indifference at others. Indeed, by 2006, the government was starting to take a strong interest in what was happening in Iraq. This stemmed from three sources. The first recognized that the security situation was deteriorating in MNDSE, which undermined the goal of conducting a successful withdrawal.

Given the deteriorating situation, there was a concern that the UK would suffer significant reputational damage if it did not establish stability and security in its area of occupation (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 7). The second, and more contentious issue, ties in with the legacy of the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, who was to stand down from his post in 2007. As such, he wanted to ensure the foundations for a successful withdrawal were in place when he handed the reins of power to his successor, Gordon Brown. Third, at the institutional level, the British Army was also eager to ensure its reputation did not take a hit because of perceived failure in Iraq. This snapshot of the war demonstrates that there were intense short-term political pressures that induced greater support for this operation from both the government and the military in 2006. In theory, this should have eased the challenge of command for Shirreff.

The Prime Minister was aware of the problem of drift in the government's policy on Iraq. As such, he responded to the election of Nouri al-Maliki and his broad Shia coalition to government by instructing the Secretary of Defence, Des Browne, to ensure the UK seized this opportunity to reinvigorate its campaign in MNDSE. Specifically, they needed to intensify the training of the Iraqi police and military to ensure the new government was provided with the means and capacity to govern. Based on Browne's efforts, the government created a plan of action, the objectives of which were to strengthen local governance, bring the militias under control, improve the capability of the Iraqi security forces, promote economic development, and prepare for British withdrawal.

On paper, this plan complimented Shirreff's plan and provided a set of tangible objectives he could work towards achieving. As such, it shows that the UK government was starting to re-focus and re-energize its campaign in MND-SE (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 3). Indeed, Browne met with Malaki to discuss the deteriorating situation in MNDSE and extracted a promise that the Iraqi government would do what it could to help stabilize the

situation in the British zone of occupation (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 15). Most important, however, is the recognition that this spike in political interest in Iraq in 2006 was prompted by a political clock which was becoming increasingly loud as rising violence in the U.S.-controlled areas of Iraq made the prospect of strategic failure look increasingly likely (Iraq Study Group, 2006).

In the case of the military, they are accused of focusing on the tactical and operational details of these campaigns instead of engaging in the bigger debate about whether and how these could be linked to the political objectives provided by the government (Strachan, 2005). In the specific case of Iraq, there is also a sense that the business-as-usual approach extended from the government to the military chain of command. This can be seen in the continued use of six-month tours of duty for senior commanders in Iraq. This was common practice in peacetime, but the limitations of such a short tour quickly became apparent in Iraq. The American military addressed this challenge, but the UK persisted with this model until it left Iraq (Ricks, 2006; Strachan, 2007). The challenge for the commander, then, was to comprehend a deeply complex operating environment and to demonstrate their brilliance in six months.

The second aspect of wartime focuses on the compression of time and the need to win quickly. This pressure was very apparent in the case of the British occupation of Iraq. However, in this case, the problem of time was tied only indirectly with the paradigm of the Western Way of War. Of greater importance was the hostility of the UK electorate to the Iraq War. By October 2005, 64 percent of Britons polled believed the war was wrong (Ipsos, 2005). The occupation also produced a series of political scandals as mounting casualties in Iraq were blamed on the provision of poor equipment, which resulted from the miserliness of the Treasury (North, 2009, pp. 228–229). In essence, Iraq was becoming a spectacular own goal for the British government, and the pressure to withdraw was mounting.

Strategic miscalculation also served to create enormous pressure to get out of Iraq as soon as possible. After three years of occupation, this weeping sore was further aggravated by the need to close one of the two wars Britain committed to in 2006. This happened because a decision was made in 2004 to deploy a brigade-sized force of 3,000 troops to Afghanistan in Spring 2006. Had the Army's plans in Iraq worked as hoped, then, according to General Dannatt, who was then Chief of the General Staff, no more than 1500 troops would have been in Iraq in 2006 rather than the 7,200 actually in place (Dannatt, 2010, p. 295).

The problem was that rising levels of violence in MND-SE 2004 and 2005 made it impossible to draw down British forces sufficiently fast to accommodate operations in Afghanistan. This served to compound resource challenges in theatre, making it difficult to achieve ambitious goals that continued to drive British strategy in Iraq in 2006. The conditions on the ground now demanded more, not fewer, troops. However, Dannett opposed the extension of the UK's occupation of Iraq and bought into the view that the mere presence of British forces was the single most important cause of the rising level of violence in MND-

SE (Dannatt, 2010, p. 254). He noted in his memoir that the Defence Board agreed on the strategic priorities for the war on terror in autumn 2006 and that it was decided that these were Afghanistan and Iraq (Dannatt, 2010, p. 248). In his eyes, Afghanistan was the more important of the two. In the case of Iraq, it was not just the UK's military presence that was making things worse in MNDSE; it was also serving to radicalize elements of the population back home in the UK (Dannatt, 2010, p. 248).

This dilemma shaped Richard Shirreff's mission. His objective was to create the conditions within MND-SE to allow the British to reduce their military footprint in Iraq as soon as possible so that these forces could be redeployed. Evidence of the difficulty of this task was demonstrated by Iraqi efforts to stabilize just the city of Basra in MND-SE in 2008. According to Richard Irons, a British military advisor attached to the 10th Iraqi Division in Basra, it took 15 Iraqi battalions to control the city (Iron, 2013, p. 172). This force was substantially larger than the three battalions of British troops available to Shirreff in 2006.

It is also important to note that the wartime construct is fragile, as demonstrated in the different tempo of the British and their American counterparts in seeking to withdraw from Iraq. This was true even before the Americans radically changed strategic direction at the end of 2006. Both nations were committed to the goal of a conditions-based withdrawal, which focused on the level of security achieved in a province and the readiness of Iraq's security forces to take on this role. However, there were significant differences between the allies over the precise metrics employed to measure whether the Iraqis had the capacity and capability to ensure internal security within a province. This became an important issue in the second half of 2006 as the British prepared to hand over the province of Maysan and, more importantly, Basra, the following year to the Iraqis (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 63). American concerns over the speed of British withdrawal, which seemed to be timed rather than conditions-based, were exacerbated when, in October 2006, an article in a British newspaper claimed General Dannatt wanted to remove all British forces from MND-SE as soon as possible (Dannatt, 2010, p. 260).

Planning Operation Sinbad: A Commander's Response to Constraint

How then did Shirreff see the situation on the ground in Iraq, and how did he intend to achieve his objective? The first point to make is that Shirreff held commands in Northern Ireland and Kosovo, and there is no doubt that this experience shaped his approach to the problem of stabilizing MND-SE. It is also important to note that this was not his first time in Iraq. In 2004, he was the commander of the 1st Mechanized Brigade, whose deployment to Iraq coincided with the rise in violence in MND-SE. As a result, he had a sufficient understanding of what was happening at the tactical level in the day-to-day operations. Finally, before assuming command of MND-SE, he conducted a reconnaissance of MND-SE to get a better appreciation of what was currently happening and how best he could achieve his

declared mission – the transfer of security from the British to the elected government of Iraq in the shortest possible time.

The most critical issue facing Shirreff was the lack of resources available to achieve his objective. He believed this caused the previous commander to be very cautious in confronting the militias in MND-SE because he lacked the means to escalate if the British were challenged. As a result, the UK adopted a largely passive and defensive posture. Shirreff also visited the U.S. Corps and theatre commanders in Iraq, General George Casey and General Peter Chiarelli. Both left him in no doubt that they were losing confidence in the British commitment – Casey reportedly said the “British approach in Basra was all about you and not about the mission” (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 162). This sent an obvious warning – the British needed to do more than proffer advice on how to do counterinsurgency to their U.S. ally.

Counterinsurgency is, by its very nature, both labour and capital-intensive. Both were in short supply in MND-SE largely because of the strategic choices and decisions made in London. By way of illustration, Shirreff highlighted that during his reconnaissance before assuming command, he was informed by the commander of the single battalion based in Basra’s city with its 1.3 million people, that he could deploy no more than 13 half platoons on the ground at any one time (195 soldiers). Shirreff noted that during his time in Northern Ireland, a whole Brigade (3000 soldiers) was deployed in just one part of Belfast (Shirreff, 2016, p. 4). Given the strategic goal was to transition to Iraqi control in the shortest time possible, it was clear that conditions on the ground challenged the hope that this process could be completed quickly (Shirreff, 2016, p. 5).

Shirreff was fortunate in that the challenge he faced was reduced in scale as first Muthana and then Dhi Qar provinces transitioned to Iraqi control during the early stages of his tenure of command. This left him with two provinces to secure and stabilize, but both posed hugely different problems. Maysan had always been a trouble spot for the British. It was here in the town of Majar al Kabir that six British military policemen were killed by a mob angered by a search for weapons in the early days of the occupation in 2003. In August 2004, British troops endured a 23-day siege by the militia Jayash Al Mahdi (JAM) in CIMIC House in Al-Amarah.

According to Shirreff, by 2006, both towns were no-go areas for the British Army unless they deployed an overwhelming force. The British base in Maysan, camp Abu Naji, was also subject to frequent attack, and resupplying the force required a considerable effort to prevent ambushes and the employment of boobytraps (Shirreff, 2016, p. 4). The importance of Maysan in security terms stemmed from the fact that much of Iran’s support for the militias operating in both Maysan and Basra came through the province. Shirreff identified the Iranian-backed militias as the source of many of the problems being experienced in MNDSE and warned PJHQ that unless this problem were addressed, they would fail (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 161).

In the case of Al Basra province, its strategic importance was evident. Iraq’s largest oil fields were located here, which meant the province was a vital component of the long-term

economic development of Iraq. Also, important was that it contained Iraq's second-largest city – the port of Basra, which constituted an important centre of gravity. According to Richard North, organized crime operating out of Basra smuggled \$4 billion of crude oil per year, much of which also went into the pockets of the militias and their political parties in Basra. This represented 10% of Iraq's GDP (North, 2009, p. 142).

How then did he respond to this challenge in terms of his plan? According to a battalion commander who served under Shirreff, Shirreff wanted to adopt a more aggressive posture in Basra. He feared that if they did not, then the UK faced the prospect of a very public defeat. This would damage the reputation of the Army and undermine the credibility of the UK military in the eyes of the United States (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 161). Planning for his command started as soon as he completed his reconnaissance in May 2006. On his return, he conducted a series of meetings with his command group, and together they developed a concept of operations. This was then presented to the PJHQ. It was made clear that the intent was to conduct a "decisive operation" to re-establish a meaningful degree of security (Shirreff, 2016, p. 10).

Shirreff wanted a plan that focused on taking offensive action against the militias into a broader security and development plan. The 19th Light Brigade was the formation given the task of carrying out this planned offensive. Basra would be cleared district by district. He briefed the officers of the 19th Light Brigade before they deployed to Iraq. At this training session, he made clear "the time has come to take the offensive against the enemy and challenge the defeatists who seem to pervade Whitehall and much of Northwood (PJHQ). The British Army was not going to lose its name in Iraq" (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 162).

According to Maciejewski, Shirreff's plans caused concern within PJHQ, and Shirreff was warned not to write cheques that the Army could not cash on the streets of Basra. Underlying this warning was a recognition that Afghanistan was now the priority. This tension also induced a sense of cynicism, which must have impacted the morale of British soldiers serving in Iraq. As Maciejewski observed: "There was a strong sense at the time, amongst those preparing for Iraq in summer 2006, that our commitment to Afghanistan was being driven by those generals who thought Afghanistan was merely a way out of Basra; it was a political antidote to the deeply unpopular mission in Iraq" (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 162).

The first challenge Shirreff faced was the need to find more troops to carry out this operation. Out of 7,000 soldiers, he could only generate an additional 200 troops to carry out his plan to improve security in Basra. Most were fixed in place or provided security for convoys. The resource was not there to ensure the achievement of the aim. As he reflected:

Over the period as a whole of my time in command – we had a strategy that involved extraction rather than necessarily achieving mission success. It was, in a sense, an exit strategy rather than a winning strategy. A winning strategy was going to require significant additional resources (Shirreff, 2016, p. 7).

In addressing these issues, Shirreff realized that he could not ask for a significant uplift in resources from London. As he explained, his weekly reports to the military headquarters in the UK PJHQ focused on the precarious security situation, but these reports provoked no response from the UK headquarters (Shirreff, 2016, p. 10). Shirreff was able to secure the temporary deployment of elements of another battalion based in Cyprus to reinforce the brigade under his command from PJHQ. In addition, he also engaged with his U.S. Corps Commander, Peter Chiarelli, in the hope of securing additional resources from the United States, which he did.

In his request for help, he said that he viewed his plan as part of a Corps-level campaign (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 163). In response, the Americans offered the services of a U.S. army battalion, but PJHQ instructed him to reject this offer. It seems the military chiefs in the UK feared this would open the door to U.S. requests for British forces to serve in the U.S.-controlled zone of occupation (Elliott, 2014, p. 117). However, he was able to secure access to U.S. Army attack helicopters and several drones. Frustratingly, the British had deployed their drone assets to Afghanistan. In total, he secured the services of an additional 1000 personnel to fulfil the mission.

This was still not enough, if we adopt the orthodox guidance on the optimum ratio of security personnel to protect a population during an insurgency, the standard calculation cited is 1:20. Even if we accept the lower estimates of Basra's population at this time, you still required 65,000 soldiers and police to secure the city (Quinlivan, 1995). The only option available was to utilize his existing resources more efficiently. To this end, he followed Clausewitzian logic in identifying the principal centre of gravity in the theatre, which he believed was securing Basra city. Second, and connected to this, was the application of the principle of economy of effort, which focused on redistributing the remainder of his forces to cut Iranian supply lines to the militias operating in Basra. This task was allocated to a cavalry regiment that had been deployed in Muthana. This then allowed for the closure of Camp Abu Naji in Maysan. It also meant the British no longer had to allocate substantial forces to provide force protection to convoys bringing supplies to the camp. These forces could also be redeployed to support the main operation in Basra.

Shirreff also leveraged available Iraqi military and police forces in Basra. To this end, a concerted effort was made to train the Iraqi military and to prepare them for their role in the planned operation. He also briefed the Iraqi commander of the 10th Division. Upon reviewing the available human resources, he realized he lacked sufficient force to hold territory once cleared, as this would dissipate his effort. Instead, forces would surge into an area before moving on to the next sector, accepting the risk that the militias might return and seize control of a space recently cleared. The aim was to establish conditions that would allow the Iraqis to assume control.

Shirreff summarized his mission objective via two lines of action. The first was "winning the battle for Basra and defeating the militant JAM and the death squads (whether by

capturing, or, if necessary, by killing them with our ROE)." The second was to separate the militias from the people through intelligence and the promotion of economic development (Shirreff, 2016, p. 36). Finally, he was advised by the Americans that his plan would need the support of the government in Baghdad. To this end, he worked closely with the UK ambassador to sell the idea to the Malaki government (Shirreff, 2016, p. 36). At this time, the Iraqi government was confronting a deteriorating security situation across large areas of the country as Al Qaeda militants sought to promote violence by exploiting the animosity between the Sunnis and Shia populations.

Much of this violence was happening in the capital, Baghdad, where approximately 23,000 civilians were murdered in this year alone. Many feared the collapse of Iraq into open civil war. As a result, the Iraqi government's first concern was to stabilize the security situation in those areas where conflict was most acute. To this end, in June, Malaki launched the Baghdad Security Plan. This entailed moving forces from southern Iraq to Baghdad at precisely the moment when Shirreff wanted to employ these elements to secure Basra.

The final element in Shirreff's game plan was the integration of the wider UK government in delivering reconstruction and development to those areas cleared by earlier military operations. Of specific importance here was the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and the UK Foreign Office (FCO). This had been a deeply problematic area for the British since the start of the occupation. Beyond the UK Ministry of Defence, there was a general lack of interest within other government departments in dealing with the aftermath of Iraq (Reid, 2003, p. 73).

Sir Hilary Synott, who was the lead representative in charge of reconstruction and development in the south of Iraq in 2003-2004, observed that the British system of government made it impossible to implement reconstruction and development in MND-SE. Although technically all government departments were held accountable for their actions through a Cabinet subcommittee that focused on Iraq, the chair of the committee had no power to compel other ministers to comply with the recommendations of the committee. As a result, government departments continued to pursue their own goals, and these did not always sit comfortably with the Prime Minister's ambitions in Iraq (Synnott, 2008, p. 27).

To address this problem and create better coordination, the military created a new construct that would operate within the theatre. Called the Comprehensive Approach, it represented an operational framework that integrated military, diplomatic, and development lines of operation so that all activity was geared to achieving an agreed goal. This structure was rolled out and employed for the first time to support Shirreff's planned operation. In sum, Shirreff crafted a plan that worked within the resource constraints set out by the government and PJHQ. However, his plan faced other significant challenges during the implementation phase, and these highlight the peculiar aspects of command in counterinsurgency.

Command in Practice: The Challenges of Implementing Operation Sinbad

Moltke declared that the first casualty of war is the plan, and so it proved to be for Shirreff, but this happened even before the first shot was fired. The most significant obstacle he encountered was not the enemy's firepower but the political opposition he faced, both within the central government in Baghdad and the local government in Basra. On paper, Malaki supported efforts to stabilize Basra and declared a state of emergency in the city. This was then followed up with the declared intent to create a Basra security plan, which the Basra Security Committee oversaw. Given that Basra was Iraq's economic lifeline and represented a significant contribution to the \$100 billion annual oil revenues that were needed to rebuild Iraq, this robust position was entirely justified.

Such action mirrored Malaki's activities to bring wider sectarian conflict to an end in Baghdad, but in the case of Basra, the roots of conflict lay not between Shia and Sunni sects, but within the Shia community itself. The key problem was that Iraq's Prime Minister depended on a broad coalition of Shia political parties to maintain power. However, these parties, which included the Sadrists and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), also had powerful vested interests in Basra. Most importantly, they maintained their private militias, the very same armed groups Shirreff was seeking to target in his efforts to promote stability and security. This provided an interesting spin on the concept of insurgency as the insurgents also served in the government, and its leaders were offered key ministries to hold as their own (Allawi, 2007).

Not surprisingly, these groups used the representation and access they had to Malaki to stop Shirreff's planned operation. Thus, Shirreff reported that just before the operation was due to begin, Sadrist ministers pressured Malaki to stop his campaign. Faced with the prospect of cancellation of his plan to stabilize Basra, Shirreff flew to Baghdad and, with the help of the U.S. theatre and corps commanders, met with Malaki to make the case for continuing with the operation (Shirreff, 2016, pp. 17–18).

Given the strong opposition to the plan, Gen George Casey advised Shirreff to approach the Basra Security Committee with a redesigned plan. This work took place between 16 and 23 September 2006. The revised operation reversed the purpose of the mission and focused on urban regeneration enabled by security. Most importantly, it specifically failed to mention strikes against the militias. The redesigned plan was presented to Malaki and Casey on 23 and 24 September. Shirreff flew members of the Basra Security Committee to Baghdad for the briefings. The new operation was to have a strong Iraqi profile and represented a clear assertion of national sovereignty. The commander of the operation was to be General Hamadi, commander of the 10th Division, rather than Gen Shirreff, who was charged with tactical coordination.

The revised operation also differed from its predecessor in two other ways. First, its duration was extended from three to nearly six months, which reflected the lack of resources

available to support the mission if delivered in a shorter timeframe. Second, the kinetic operations would not be delivered as part of the proposed stabilization mission but would be a distinct British operation carried out under the remit of past UN resolutions to detain and arrest people who threatened the security of Iraq. According to Macejewski, this part of the plan was not presented in detail to Malaki. Instead, Gen Casey presented the repackaged plan. Casey also visited Basra and spoke to Hamadi, who was having second thoughts and needed to be persuaded again why this was a good idea. After much haggling and negotiation, the operation was finally approved on 28 September 2006.

Implementation of the plan was also affected by institutional politics within the UK's central government. Galula observed that within the setting of conventional war, it is easy to allocate tasks and responsibilities among the government, which directs the operations, the population, which provides the tools, and the soldier, who utilizes them (Galula, 1964, p. 5). However, in the case of counterinsurgency, task allocation is more difficult. Given that the objective is to control the population operations to win hearts and minds, political action remains foremost. As such:

It is not enough to establish political goals; determining the appropriate military force is also crucial. Politics becomes an active instrument of operation. And so intricate is the interplay between the political and the military actions that they cannot be tidily separated; on the contrary, every military move has to be weighed in terms of its political effects and vice versa (Galula, 1964, p. 4).

According to one observer, Shirreff placed great hope in the Comprehensive Approach as a way of attempting to coordinate all the levers of UK national power within Basra. Two fundamental problems were highlighted by Shirreff, which made the realization of this aspiration problematic. The first was the increased level of violence within Basra itself, which made it difficult for British civilian aid agencies to move around the city. In addition, the FCO and DFID base of operations in Basra Palace was subjected to increased mortar and rocket attacks. As a result, it became necessary to remove most of the civilian staff, including the FCO and DFID teams from Basra and relocate them. This meant a vital element of the non-kinetic strand of the plan lacked the expertise and human resources required to achieve success.

Shirreff observed that cooperation between the various arms of government was made more complicated because they were geographically separated. The military headquarters was located at Basra airport at what was called the Contingency Operating Base (COB). Matters on this front did not improve when the FCO and DFID teams left Basra Palace and relocated to Kuwait (Shirreff, 2016, p. 39). However, the problems of coordination ran more deeply and extended back into the executive of the British government. A good illustration of this was the inability of the Foreign Secretary and her counterpart in DFID to provide any financial support to the Better Basra Plan being pushed by the Defence Secretary and supported by the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. Both claimed their budgets had already been allocated

for the year (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 12). According to one battalion commander, the British only provided \$10 million to support Shirreff's plan to stabilize Basra. This compared unfavourably with the \$80 million provided by the Americans (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 164).

It is also noteworthy that in Shirreff's post-tour review of Operation Sinbad, which was presented to the Prime Minister, he recommended that in future operations, someone should be appointed to oversee the implementation of the Comprehensive Approach and coordinate all government agencies. Most interesting is that Blair strongly supported this recommendation and thought the obvious candidate should be GOC MNDSE. Blair pushed for this action to be implemented, but there is no record of a response from Whitehall on this contentious matter (The Iraq Inquiry, 2016c, p. 71). Finally, it is interesting to note that the UK stabilization doctrine's view on this matter was that "In the absence of formal authority over other agencies, the commander needs to build tacit authority using his powers of persuasion" (UK Ministry of Defence, 2009, p. 48).

The third problem combined politics with resource scarcity. Shirreff's plan divided Basra into sixteen districts based on perceived levels of consent in each area. Following the Malaya model of counterinsurgency, he then focused his efforts on first securing those districts where support for action was likely to be the most positive. Once a district was chosen, forces would surge into the area to establish temporary security, and the implementation of various small-scale community projects would follow this. The problem was that there was insufficient force to hold a district once it had been cleared, which left the population exposed to the return of militias and thus breached one of the cardinal guidelines of counterinsurgency, which was to separate the people from the insurgents.

In an ideal world, the British should have been able to rely on the Iraqi security forces to conduct this task, but it is claimed that both the quantity and quality of forces were not available. Two reasons are cited to explain this failure. The first was the infiltration of the militias into the police, a practice which was encouraged by the British during the early days of the occupation (Chin, 2008). However, it is also claimed that Americans placed a low priority on capacity building of security forces in the British sector and tended to cream off the most capable Iraqi personnel, who were then deployed to fight in Baghdad. This low prioritization also extended to the infrastructure needed to support the police and the Army. As a result, barracks were not built, and so members of the security forces were forced to live with their families in Basra, and this made them vulnerable to the militias (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 165).

The combined effect of these choices led to the creation of a police force that was so corrupt it was virtually unusable, and an army with low training and morale, which limited their utility. Evidence of the poor condition of the Iraqi Army in MND-SE was demonstrated when a battalion, which was part of the 10th Division, mutinied when ordered to deploy to Baghdad in September 2006. The size of the Iraqi Army available to support the British was also tiny and amounted to four companies of troops, approximately 400 men (Maciejewski,

2013, p. 165). Finally, no Iraqi reinforcements were possible at this time because of the escalating violence in Baghdad and its environs (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 166).

The final problem lay in the kinetic domain. According to Macejewski, JAM was opposed to the operation from the start. British patrols were targeted with sniper fire during each security pulse, or IEDs were used on logistic resupply convoys and during training visits to police stations following the first pulse. Their attacks concentrated on the pause phase, which was when security was at its lowest. Through this action, JAM was able to stop engagement with local communities and their leaders and thereby undermine the hearts and minds campaign (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 169). In addition, JAM also increased the use of indirect fire against British forces. Between September and May 2007, over 1200 rockets and mortar shells were fired at Basra Palace, and it became the most heavily rocketed location in Iraq.

Through this action, JAM demonstrated that they, not the British, controlled the streets of Basra. Efforts to suppress this fire proved largely futile. The Iraqi Army sent out patrols that sought to capture those firing the rockets. The same fate befell the two British battlegroups, which could counter mortars but were unable to stop rocket fire as these had a range of 10 km. Counter-rocket patrols created predictable patterns of movement, which in turn made them vulnerable to IEDs. Although UAVs provided some assistance, the systems provided by U.S. forces had a limited range. Similarly, the attack helicopters were useful, but these were withdrawn in December (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 169).

British countermeasures against this threat improved, and an entire rocket team was captured using helicopter-mounted cameras. This allowed the British to follow the rocket team as they made their way back to their safe house. Once located, British troops moved in and captured them. This revealed much intelligence and the extent of Iranian assistance. More offensive action became possible in March 2007 as a combination of direction-finding radar and the camera-equipped Sea King helicopters allowed the British to strike back with artillery and airstrikes dropped by U.S. Navy carrier aircraft. However, increased effectiveness in countering rockets did not result in the reduction of the threat; in fact, the number and frequency of the attacks went up. In response, the U.S. deployed radar detachments to Basra and the MOD deployed close air defence systems from ships to shoot down rockets (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 170).

The commander of the 19th Light Bde responded to the attacks by launching a major offensive to capture or kill those involved with a militia. In total, nearly 50 nighttime strike operations were conducted by British battlegroups, an average of three per week. The results were impressive: 198 detained and interned, of whom 68 were identified as leaders within the militias. Macejewski believes these attacks were a symbol of defiance, showing real opposition to the militias: "It was during this period that many locals referred to the British troops as the Lions of Basra" (Maciejewski, 2013, p. 170). The most dramatic military action was the joint British and Iraqi attack against the headquarters of the Serious Crimes Unit, a police unit heavily infiltrated by the militias and used as a cover to attack principally those who opposed Moqtada al-Sadr and JAM.

Operation Sinbad ended on 18 February 2007. Not surprisingly, the British claimed their aims had been achieved. Some semblance of security was restored to Basra, and most importantly, the Iraqi military and police were now in a far better position to assume control. However, the British and the Iraqi government were unable to consolidate their achievements, and it was not long before the militias were able to restore control over the city. Operation Sinbad is a classic example of a tactical success that, in the end, became a strategic failure, as none of the stated reasons for its launch and implementation were achieved.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the challenge of command in contemporary counterinsurgency through two concepts. The first builds on Rynning, Schmitt, and Thuessen's concept of wartime. The second is Mackay's high modern utopianism. Operation Sinbad offers a revealing example of the structural contradictions that define Western counterinsurgency campaigns in the twenty-first Century. While Major General Shirreff's approach demonstrated tactical dexterity and an awareness of the political terrain, his command was ultimately shaped—and in crucial respects undermined—by the institutional and temporal constraints of Britain's liberal strategic culture. The operation was conceived within a paradigm that demanded political transformation at speed but delivered neither the time nor the tools to consolidate gains.

The vaunted Comprehensive Approach disintegrated under interdepartmental fragmentation, while resource constraints and short tour rotations reflected a broader refusal to adapt institutional practices to the protracted realities of insurgency warfare. These issues were accentuated within the urban setting in which Operation Sinbad happened. Anthony King observes that in the past, Fidel Castro's comment that cities were the graveyard of insurgents was essentially true, and, more often than not, the state security forces were able to defeat the insurgency in the cities. He believes the fundamental reason for state success in the past lay in the ability of governments to generate the required force levels needed to control the urban population. Today, Western states cannot generate such force-to-population ratios, which explains the more mixed outcomes of recent urban counterinsurgency campaigns (King, 2021, pp. 45–59).

In the case of Operation Sinbad, success on this front required the large-scale mobilization of Iraq's state security apparatus, but this required the commander to display less traditional forms of command. As such, contemporary command is less an exercise in operational authority than one of navigating political risk, narrative management, and coalition fragility. Tactical gains were not matched by strategic coherence, and the reversion to militia control in Basra underscores the limitations of command within a system that privileges withdrawal timelines over enduring outcomes. If counterinsurgency is to remain a via-

ble instrument of Western strategy it demands not just doctrinal revision but a fundamental reckoning with the ideological and institutional pathologies that render such operations strategically hollow. Shirreff's experience reminds us that the challenge is not simply how to command in small wars, but whether our institutions can sustain the kinds of command such wars require.

This study is subject to several limitations inherent in its design. As a single-case study, its findings on the constraints facing British command in Basra are illustrative rather than generalizable across all counterinsurgency campaigns or military cultures. The analysis also relies primarily on the perspectives of senior commanders and publicly available documents, and a more comprehensive picture could be developed with access to a broader range of archival materials or interviews with junior leaders and civilian counterparts.

These limitations, however, open several avenues for future research. A productive next step would be a comparative analysis, contrasting the British experience in Operation Sinbad with the contemporaneous U.S. command approach during the "Surge" in Anbar province. Such a study could further interrogate how differing institutional cultures, political pressures, and resource allocations shaped command effectiveness and strategic outcomes. Further research could also trace the long-term consequences of the "temporal paradox" identified here, examining how the strategic choices made in 2006-07 influenced the eventual British withdrawal and the subsequent security environment in southern Iraq.

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About the author

Warren Anthony Chin holds a PhD and MA from the War Studies Department, King's College London. He is Chair of the Defence and Security Programme at Rabdan Academy, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. He has thirty years of experience working in both civilian and professional military educational establishments. In that time, he has taught at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, including supervision of PhD students. However, his main area of expertise is in the delivery of professional military education, and for the last years, he has taught students from officer cadets at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst to generals at the Royal College of Defence Studies and the Joint Services Command and Staff College. His main area of research focuses on the study of contemporary warfare in all its forms.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8876-5259> - Contact: wchin@ra.ac.ae

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