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A Gentle Occupation : Dutch military Operations in Iraq, 2003-2005

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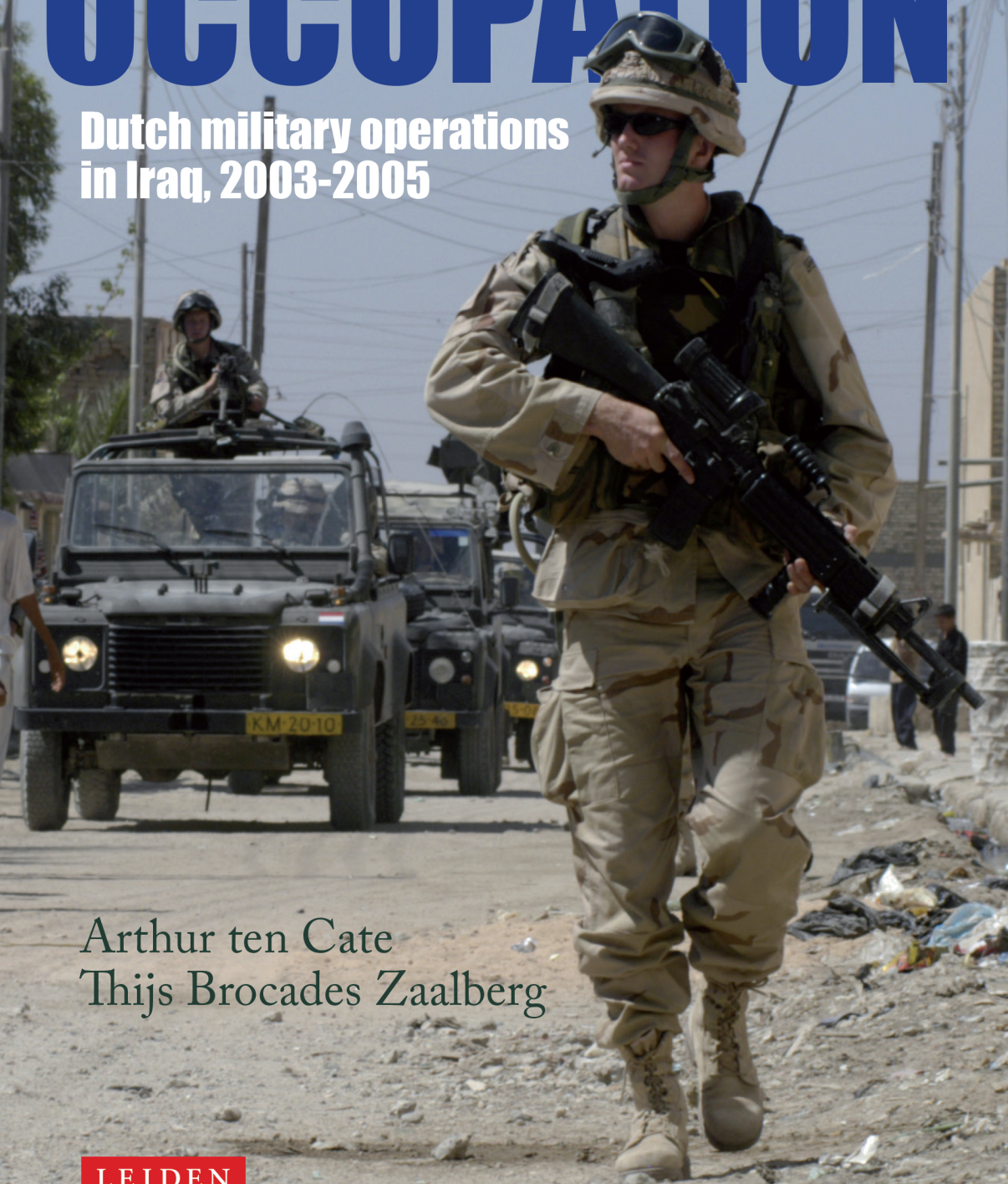
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A GENTLE OCCUPATION

**Dutch military operations
in Iraq, 2003-2005**



Arthur ten Cate
Thijs Brocades Zaalberg

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Introduction

Dutch military operations in Iraq, 2003-2005

In March and April 2003, a military coalition led by the United States and United Kingdom toppled the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the space of just three weeks. Soon afterwards, on 6 June 2003, the Dutch government decided to contribute a battalion of Marines plus support units to the allied stabilisation effort in the wake of the invasion. That summer, Dutch forces relieved US troops in the Southern Iraqi province of Al Muthanna. However, the Dutch government repeatedly stressed that its forces did not form part of the original allied occupation army. Their task was only to contribute to security and stability in the province in order to enable the economic and political reconstruction of Iraq.¹ In the Netherlands, the military deployment was given the name Stabilisation Force Iraq, abbreviated to SFIR.

The Dutch armed forces deployed five successive reinforced and self-supporting combat battalions (known as battle groups) to Southern Iraq on four-monthly rotations between July 2003 and March 2005. During the first two rotations, the roughly 1,200-strong tailor-made units consisted of Marine battalions, while the subsequent three were made up of Army (mechanised, air assault or mixed) infantry battalions. The Royal Netherlands Air Force supported the ground forces with Chinook, Cougar and Apache helicopters and Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (gendarmerie and military police) personnel played an important role in training new Iraqi security forces.

At the time, the Dutch military considered the deployment and operation in Iraq to be complicated and challenging. The SFIR mission clearly deviated from previous international ‘crisis response operations’,

the formal umbrella term under which the Netherlands had conducted peacekeeping, peace support or humanitarian operations since the end of the Cold War in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. After all, the 2003 Iraq operation was set up in the wake of a controversial invasion, followed by an equally controversial occupation, which subsequently met with increasing armed resistance. 'SFIR' therefore was no standard peace operation in the sense that there was no peace agreement to uphold, and there were no warring parties to separate, disarm or control on behalf of a non-alligned international community.

Instead, the Dutch joined an ad hoc interventionist coalition. This raised the question, inside and outside the Dutch armed forces, what was actually entailed by such a deployment of a so-called 'stabilisation force' within the framework of the occupation of a country by a warfighting alliance rather than within the framework (and with the mandate) of the Netherlands' usual (and preferred) international structures like the United Nations (UN) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). What did this coalition force do to bring security to Iraq and in what respect was it or was it not an occupying force?

First the facts. Iraq, after the invasion in March and April 2003, was occupied by foreign troops, with a view to forming a new, democratic government for and by the Iraqis themselves. The regime of dictator Saddam Hussein had been removed. The US-UK civil occupation authority (Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA) and its multinational armed forces attempted to construct a new state. This ambitious project took place in a country that was at rock bottom due to years of war, destruction, international sanctions, disastrous economic policies, corruption and an internal reign of terror. Nevertheless, there was optimism and relief among many sections of the 'liberated' Iraqi population, which happily threw off the yoke of over forty years of totalitarian rule.

There were reasons for pessimism too, however. Parts of the old regime, previously organised into the all-powerful Baath (Renaissance) party, went underground and started a violent insurgency. They were joined by foreign fighters with anti-American intentions, ostensibly aided by (sympathisers from) neighbouring countries like Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Many other Iraqi nationalist or religious groups also took up arms. One tactic of these resistance movements was to cause disruption by inciting violence between the different groups within Iraqi society. Defeatists soon predicted the disintegration of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, with ultimately civil war between Kurdish, Arab Sunni

and Arab Shiite groups as the worst-case scenario. For the time being, however, the foreign occupying powers and their allies – such as the Netherlands – were trying to set the country on its way to a peaceful and democratic future.

Controversy in the Netherlands

At the end of 2002 and in early 2003, the majority of the Dutch population opposed a military contribution to the invasion of Iraq. Even the Dutch government's decision to back the war only politically, and not militarily, met with substantial resistance. The compromise, reached by the short-lived, so-called Balkenende I government (2002-2003), which had already resigned by early 2003 and operated in the shadows of a national election, was seen as a typical example of Dutch '*polder*' politics. It demonstrated how the political elite of a small country, when it comes to foreign policy, often has to come up with a compromise between public opinion, its own political reality (in this case an election campaign and the formation of a new government) and the desire to comply with the requirements and demands of an important and powerful ally.

Former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) expressed the rather populist opinion of many when he claimed that under the leadership of his successor, Jan Peter Balkenende of the Christian-Democrats (CDA), the Netherlands had apparently become the United States' lapdog. For many years after 2003 there was a debate about why the government in The Hague had seemed so eager to please its powerful partner in Washington in this thorny matter.² Was there some truth in the public perception that Dutch political support for the invasion of Iraq was related to the appointment, later in 2003, of Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (CDA) to the post of Secretary-General of NATO? Did Dutch support raise the stature of the Netherlands in international US-dominated fora or were trade interests perhaps involved, as in the case of Britain's oil companies,³ and did support bring with it the promise of profitable contracts for Dutch businesses? Or was it simply a matter of (dogmatic) 'Atlantic solidarity' with the US and UK allies? The decision to back the war in Iraq remained a national conundrum for years to come.

In spite of the broad opposition to the invasion, national (media) attention and public appreciation for the Dutch troops in Iraq was almost exclusively positive. This is remarkable, given the fact that opinion polls regularly showed that the deployment in Iraq itself was consistently valued

less highly than other Dutch overseas crisis response operations in the past. With only 38 per cent in agreement with the deployment, 41 per cent against and 21 per cent without an opinion, the operation was arguably more controversial than the war waged against Indonesian nationalist forces during the decolonisation struggle in the former Dutch East Indies in the late 1940s. The operation in Iraq was even more unpopular than the failed Dutch UN-deployment in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica in 1994-1995, which – like the military operations in the former Asian colony – had occasionally been the subject of heated public debate, partly due to its dramatic ending.⁴ The operation in Iraq thus stood out in a very negative sense, irrespective of the appreciation for individual military personnel.

A Dutch success story?

What explains the positive appraisal of the Dutch troops on the ground in Iraq? The national media devoted a great deal of attention to SFIR, perhaps even more than to previous overseas operations, and in spite of the controversial circumstances the general tone was positive. Dutch forces at the same time presented a positive image abroad. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, for instance, tried to reassure his fellow countrymen when Australian troops took over responsibility for Al Muthanna province in the spring of 2005 by referring to the Dutch who had preceded them. He emphasised their supposedly successful operations, which had been internationally praised after an article appeared in the *New York Times* on 24 October 2004. According to the paper, the Dutch had been open and friendly towards the Iraqi people, preferring to drive around in open vehicles rather than in armoured cars. The article quoted an inhabitant of the provincial capital As Samawah, who said that the Dutch had shown respect, much more than the Americans. The head of police confirmed this view by saying that the Dutch had made a real effort to understand local traditions. He added that Iraqis viewed the Americans but not the Dutch as an occupying force.⁵

The article defined what the Dutch themselves had started to call the ‘Dutch approach’: a military presence that is friendly but robust when and where necessary, with good intentions and empathy for local customs and habits. An interesting and attractive viewpoint, but the ultimate question was of course whether the relative peace in Al Muthanna province during the years 2003-2005 could indeed be ascribed to this supposedly positive and effective ‘typically Dutch’ operational style, if in fact such a thing

existed at all. Or were the positive memories which the Netherlands came to cherish about this SFIR operation mainly due to the canny choice for the safest area of deployment which Iraq had to offer? Al Muthanna was hardly a hotbed of the emerging insurgency. “The Dutch selected this area because it is peaceful,” one inhabitant of Al Muthanna insisted in December 2003. “It will remain peaceful after the Dutch have left.”⁶

The nature of SFIR

So what was the true nature of SFIR, a mission that the Dutch government primarily defined in terms of what it was *not*? As far as the responsible Balkenende I (2002-2003) and Balkenende II (2003-2006) governments were concerned, the idea that the Iraqis saw the Americans and British but not their Dutch allies as occupiers served as the foundation for the Netherlands’ participation in the occupation of Iraq. The Dutch politicians viewed the US and UK as sole occupying powers, with all the responsibilities that role entailed, while the Dutch pretended to contribute to a supposedly separate multinational peace operation. In the spring of 2003, a reassuring, fashionable term began to be used in official communications on the deployment to Iraq. The Netherlands was contributing to a ‘stabilisation force’, without it being clear exactly what this meant.

The phrase ‘stabilisation force’ was just as undefined as other official umbrella terms like ‘crisis response operation’. One could make it fit anything. When combined with the abbreviation SFIR – only used by the Dutch – it particularly harked back to the Stabilisation Force in Bosnia (SFOR), the NATO operation in which the Netherlands participated intensively from 1996 to 2004. SFOR served to keep conflicting parties apart using a robust display of military power. The force created a kind of safety cordon within which civilian actors, such as (international) governmental and non-governmental organisations, could work on reconstructing the country torn apart by war. Aspects such as public administration, police tasks and reconstruction were expressly not part of the military tasks of SFOR in Bosnia. On paper, the 2003 Dutch SFIR operation in Iraq was defined in similar terms, although there was a completely different international, political and military framework within which it was conducted.⁷

In official documents on the Iraq operation, the Dutch Ministry of Defence never used the term ‘peace operation’. Yet in the country’s collective memory the mission became a deployment to be viewed in the tradition of Dutch contributions to international peace support missions,

and not, for example, in the tradition of the Dutch armed forces' experiences in occupations, in imposing military rule, or in counter-insurgency and other types of irregular warfare (from the colonial past in particular). Did this mean that the Netherlands no longer saw any difference between occupation and peacekeeping? Had it become so popular to suppose that the Dutch armed forces were only deployed overseas out of a sense of altruism, that each deployment abroad, including Iraq, was automatically earmarked as a peace operation? Or did the media and public see through this fabricated narrative and was this the reason the operation was so unpopular?

In general, the extent to which operations by Dutch troops in Iraq tallied with the political message, or not was rarely accounted for or debated. As could be expected, an altogether different situation developed on the Iraqi battlefield. As a result, the military were increasingly torn between the reality of an occupation and their political mandate. In other words: the emphatic political wish not to be seen as an occupying force while participating in an occupation, and in doing so claiming a status different from that of the Americans and the British (and other allies), seemed operationally untenable.

Could military personnel therefore implement the political mandate in practice? What was the Dutch contribution to the multinational deployment in Iraq between 2003 and 2005, and under what conditions did Dutch forces conduct their tasks? What was the so-called 'mission design'? How did the Dutch contribution to the occupation of Iraq come into being both politically and operationally and which aspects typified this mission (and the preparations for it) in the field? What was the state of the operational environment of Al Muthanna as encountered by the various Dutch SFIR contingents (NLBGS), how did they operate in this battle space and in what condition was the province when they left?

A gentle occupation?

This book examines the operations of the Dutch battle groups deployed in Iraq between July 2003 and April 2005. Using mainly information from military archives (some of it classified) and from interviews with military personnel, it focuses primarily on the tactical level. Operations are described within the international and domestic politico-strategic climate of the time. In the course of this, the abovementioned themes are elaborated with a view to classifying the mission and critically analysing the supposed causal link between the so-called 'Dutch approach' and the relative stability in the

appointed area of operations. To this end, this study dissects all aspects of SFIR, while the themes of its chapters reflect the shifting emphasis over time.

Chapter 1 introduces the 2003 war against the Baath regime from an international perspective and shows how the Dutch government arrived at the decision to support the invasion politically in the period between 2002 and 2003. It subsequently analyses how the decision to deploy SFIR was made. In what way did the government present the military operation and how did it translate the difference between ‘occupier’ and ‘non-occupier’ in the military assignment? Chapter 2 deals with the first few months of the operation, during which the gap between the formal assignment – with all its limitations – and the unwieldy and rapidly evolving reality on the ground was revealed. How did the NLBG operate as part of the international force and how did the unit cope with the mandate and enforced restrictions, such as the ban on executive police tasks?

Chapter 3 discusses a similar friction between theory and practice, resulting from the caveat that prohibited the undertaking of any administrative tasks. What repercussions did this have on relations with the CPA (on all levels) and with the British divisional headquarters in Basra? What problems did the Dutch encounter and what emerged as the focal point of operations? Did they ever go as far as exercising any form of military government? These themes are elaborated on in Chapter 4, which emphasises the central role for the NLBG from the autumn of 2003: the resurrection and training of new Iraqi security organisations.

Chapter 5 focuses on the growing resistance to the Coalition Forces from the spring of 2004 onwards. How did the operational environment change as a result of the mounting insurgency and how did the NLBG and the Netherlands’ national Defence Staff respond to this development? The occupation of Iraq was officially coming to an end, but did this cause a shift towards a peace support-like stabilisation operation or was there a shift towards countering irregular warfare? Chapter 6 deals with civil-military cooperation and reconstruction activities by the Dutch in relation to the security issues and with the continued development of Iraqi security forces up to the crucial national elections of January 2005. Not long after this milestone, the Netherlands completed its military operation in Al Muthanna. Chapter 7 opens with the withdrawal of Dutch forces from Iraq and subsequently answers the book’s key questions: was there a typical Dutch approach to the mission that can explain the relative stability in Al Muthanna in 2003-2005 and how can Dutch operations in Iraq in this period be typified?

1

Towards Iraq

Mixed feelings: Dutch politics and Iraq

In October 2005, Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs Ben Bot (CDA) caused political upheaval in the House of Representatives (known in the Netherlands as the Second Chamber) with a remarkably honest statement on the US-UK invasion of Iraq of March 2003: “Looking back at the overall process, it is legitimate to question whether it was sensible for the occupying powers to have invaded Iraq.”¹ Bot said he wondered whether “with the knowledge we have now” – the knowledge that Iraq no longer possessed weapons of mass destruction at the time the war started – it would not have been more sensible to deal with the issue of Iraq’s disarmament “using other, diplomatic means” and whether “it would have been better to have conducted further investigations” rather than to intervene militarily so early. In making these remarks, the Minister both renounced two major allies in retrospect, and questioned the decision of the Balkenende I government – the ‘right-wing conservative’ coalition of the Christian-Democratic CDA, the populist *Lijst Pim Fortuyn* (LPF) and the conservative *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (VVD) – to support the attack on Iraq as wholeheartedly as it did in 2003.

The CDA and VVD parties, which returned to power in the Balkenende II government (on this occasion in a coalition with the small ‘left-wing liberal’ party *Democraten ’66* – D66) promptly reacted, as daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* reported the next day, “as if they had been stung by a wasp. ‘The minister is basically saying that the Netherlands’ political support [for the Iraq war] was incorrect,’ VVD Member of Parliament [Hans] van Baalen concluded.”² The implication of the reaction was that if Minister

Bot wished to remain in office he should publicly retract his words. He did so that evening on national television. “As a Dutch government minister,” daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* wrote, “constitutionally obliged to defend the policy of his predecessors – in this case fellow CDA member [Jaap] De Hoop Scheffer – Bot stated on television that if it were now 2003 he ‘would have taken precisely the same decision’ as the cabinet had then.” Nevertheless, the paper reported, “the fact remains that since yesterday we know what the current Minister for Foreign Affairs [really] thinks about the invasion of Iraq: it was ill-judged.” In its leading article, the paper commented that the Minister should be applauded. “In view of the importance of overseas military operations in which the Netherlands is or will become directly or indirectly involved, his comments should give rise to serious debate on how and why a country goes to war, rather than to political bickering.”³

Yet, things needed to be smoothed out. On 6 October, Prime Minister Balkenende and Minister Bot told Parliament that the government’s position on the invasion of Iraq was unchanged. “The position was, is and will remain that the Netherlands provided political support to the military intervention in Iraq because Saddam Hussein refused to cooperate with the implementation of the UN Security Council resolutions which called on the country to disarm. The crux of the matter is that Saddam Hussein did not cooperate sufficiently and failed to provide convincing answers to those questions identified by the UN,” Balkenende stated.⁴

The political upheaval of October 2005 served to emphasise that, nearly three years on, there was still a great difference of opinion in the Dutch political arena between supporters and opponents of the 2003 intervention. Parties such as the PvdA and also the ruling D66 believed that the US and UK had initiated the war against Iraq prematurely and under false pretences. They therefore thought that a parliamentary inquiry needed to be held into the Dutch government’s decision to support the invasion.

CDA and VVD, which served in both the Balkenende I and II governments, their former coalition partner LPF and some small Christian parties continued to believe that the support for the ad hoc alliance against Iraq was correct, even in retrospect. Saddam Hussein’s regime had been a threat to the world and his own people, had ignored numerous UN resolutions and had finally refused to cooperate in its own disarmament; such was the view of this (small) parliamentary majority, which therefore succeeded in preventing an inquiry being set up. The

subsequent stalemate of opinions on Iraq persisted for years. No inquiry was held (until 2009) and the political crisis caused by Minister Bot's comments abated. But it had once again become clear that autumn, over two and a half years after the war, that people in the Netherlands (as elsewhere in the world) looked back on the Iraq crisis with mixed feelings, to say the least. Even though the Dutch had never really gone to war over Iraq, the stance of the Dutch government was and remained a bone of contention.

Iraq as an international threat

Iraq had long been viewed, also by the Netherlands, as a security threat in a region of significant geostrategic importance. Dictator Saddam Hussein and his Baath party conducted a true reign of terror. In the 1970s, thanks to oil revenues and support from the Soviet Union, the country evolved into a heavily-armed military power which threatened its neighbours. In the 1980s, the West nevertheless embraced Iraq as a counterweight against the Islamic regime in Iran, which was considered to be much more dangerous. Throughout Saddam's war against the revolution-preaching ayatollahs in Teheran, Western countries supported him with arms supplies and intelligence. They ignored his use of chemical weapons and other human rights violations, just as they paid little attention to the reign of terror against his own people, including a genocide campaign against the Kurds. However, his invasion of the small neighbouring state of Kuwait in August 1990 put the Iraqi president on the wrong side of the international order in the eyes of the West. The occupation of this small, southerly neighbour was perceived as an aggressive violation of Kuwait's sovereignty and giving Iraq potentially the control of too large a part of the oil production capability in the Persian Gulf region.

In the autumn of 1990 a large us-led international force gathered in Saudi Arabia on Iraq's border. "This will not stand," us President George H.W. Bush said in response to the Iraqi occupation of the emirate.⁵ At the end of 1990, the UN Security Council authorised the multinational force in the Arabian Desert to liberate Kuwait, using force if necessary. As Saddam Hussein refused to budge, this occurred after a steady build-up of military resources in January and February 1991. The combined air and land operation (a lengthy bombing campaign, followed by a short, rapid land war) went down in history as Operation Desert Storm. The Iraqi army was utterly defeated and driven out of Kuwait.⁶

As part of the peace agreement imposed by the international community in resolution 687 and adopted one month after the war on 3 April 1991, the UN Security Council determined that Iraq would in the future be subject to severe restrictions governing the possession and development of weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. It was beyond doubt that Iraq had possessed such weapons and continued to develop them. The Security Council demanded that the Iraqi regime destroy its remaining NBC weapon systems, including all means of delivery with a range greater than 150 kilometres. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) were to supervise compliance.

The international community thus placed Iraq under legal restraint. UNSCOM and IAEA commenced their detailed inspections of the Iraqi arms industry and armed forces. As long as the country did not meet the disarmament criteria, the economic sanctions which had been imposed the previous year remained in force. These included an export ban on oil, Iraq's main source of revenue. An arms embargo also remained in place. The five permanent Security Council members held widely differing opinions on the interpretation of these sanctions, however. France, the Soviet Union (subsequently the Russian Federation) and China saw them as a means to influence the Iraqi government and to obtain cooperation for the planned disarmament. The United States and the United Kingdom saw them as a possible catalyst for regime change, a means with which they hoped to stage a coup against Saddam Hussein in the long term.⁷

The dictator and his cronies, however, held a tighter grip on power than these countries realised. Shortly after the Gulf War, for instance, the Baath regime succeeded in crushing two major domestic uprisings, in the south by the Shiites and in the north by the Kurds. The subsequent flood of refugees led to international humanitarian aid operations and to the UN Security Council setting up a temporary safe haven in and no-fly zone above the north of Iraq. In 1992, a similar no-fly zone was created in the south. In the years that followed, the enforcement of these two no-fly zones became an allied instrument for further restricting the Iraqi government's military freedom of movement.

Inspections and confrontations

In the meantime, the inspections relating to the disarmament of Iraq became a game of cat and mouse. The UN inspectors attempted to get to the bottom of things, while the Iraqis did all they could to keep their weapons

development programmes hidden from the outside world.⁸ UNSCOM was constantly negotiating with the Iraqi regime on access to locations and archives, and in general on the freedom of movement of the inspection teams. These teams, comprising specialists from a group of willing and able UN member states, conducted searches throughout Iraq. They frequently encountered obstacles and were fed incomplete or misleading information. Twenty countries, including the Netherlands, participated in the international inspections. In total, between June 1991 and November 1998, fourteen Dutch specialists in nuclear, biological or chemical warfare contributed to the operation.⁹

In 1995, it became clear that Iraq had spent the previous years successfully hiding large sections of its nuclear, biological and chemical weapons development programmes.¹⁰ The Swedish chair of UNSCOM, Rolf Ekéus (who held the position until 1997), and his Australian successor Richard Butler (1997-1999) repeatedly reported that Iraq continued to sabotage the disarmament process. In early 1998, the situation escalated into a major international crisis. Iraq denied the inspectors access to specific suspect locations. The US and UK amassed troops in the Gulf region. However, the hard line they took was no longer supported by France, the Russian Federation and China. These three countries sought to resume trade with Iraq and pleaded for a phased relaxation of the sanctions and the normalisation of relations. This division in the Security Council encouraged the Iraqi regime to continue calling the international sanctions into question and obstructing UNSCOM. In October 1998, Iraq withdrew all cooperation from UNSCOM. When head of UNSCOM Butler reported in December 1998 that his personnel were no longer able to carry out their tasks properly due to Iraq's conduct, the US and the UK chose the military option.¹¹

Operation Desert Fox was a four-day bombing campaign against Iraq's weapons development programme and defence and security apparatus. Targets included suspected weapons factories, defence sites, so-called 'presidential buildings' that UNSCOM had been forbidden from entering, air defence facilities, command & control and communications centres, and barracks of the Republican Guard, the military pillar of the Baath regime. It was a spectacular climax to the many years of inspections, but failed to break the deadlock. The bombings were also not confined to these four days alone. The military option was continued. In the first few months of 1999, the allied air forces attacked Iraqi military installations daily. They attempted to complete – through the use of force – the seemingly

unfinished business of the inspections. Throughout the year, a 'silent' air war was played out in the no-fly zones above Iraq.¹²

The chief consequence of this armed confrontation was the end of UNSCOM. Iraq did not permit the UN commission to resume its work. Still, nearly eight years after the end of the Gulf War, it was unclear whether the sanctions, inspections and bombings had led to the full disarmament of the Iraqi rogue state. While Saddam Hussein retained a firm grip on power, the Security Council became even more divided. The US and UK continued to pursue their path of military confrontation, against ever-louder appeals from France, Russia and China to give Iraq the benefit of the doubt. The latter three nations' argument in favour of the removal of the economic embargo and the creation of a new international inspection mechanism was aided by growing media coverage of a suffering Iraqi population.¹³

Military intervention?

Thus the question whether the containment policy on Iraq had failed or not, and which options were still open, was becoming ever more pressing. By the end of the decade the US was increasingly talking about the possibility of a more robust military approach. Many politicians, experts and commentators thought that what the international coalition had failed to do in 1991 should be done now: the removal of Saddam Hussein and his followers by means of force. Even before Operation Desert Fox, in October 1998, US Congress had adopted a law which released funds for arming Iraqi opposition groups. Earlier still, in 1996, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had attempted to organise a coup via the Iraqi army. The plot had been foiled by the Iraqi secret service. Hundreds were killed.¹⁴ The administration of President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) held the view that the most radical option of military intervention using ground troops was unnecessary though. In its view, the Iraq issue was a relatively limited security threat which, following the departure of the UN inspectors, could be kept under control using air power.

Everything changed with the arrival of a new US government headed by George W. Bush in January 2001 and with the terrorist attacks of 11 September of that year in New York and Washington. The Bush administration (2001-2009) contained many hardliners. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith, National Security Council staff Director Elliott Abrams, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and

Undersecretary of State John Bolton were all advocates of a regime change in Baghdad. In 1998, they had called on President Clinton in an open letter to disarm Iraq by military means.¹⁵ They now had the ear of Vice-President Dick Cheney, obviously a man of great influence in the administration. Over the years, Cheney, who had been Secretary of Defense under Bush Senior during the 1991 Gulf War, had also become convinced that the coalition from the first war should have removed the Baghdad dictator.¹⁶

In the days following the events of 9/11, these foreign policy 'hawks' placed tackling Iraq high on the agenda. The hunt was initially on for the perpetrators directly responsible for the attacks on the Pentagon and the New York World Trade Center. Within a few weeks, Washington started a military campaign (Operation Enduring Freedom) against the Al-Qaeda terrorist network headed by Saudi extremist Osama bin Laden and against the Islamic-fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In the longer term however, the Bush administration opted to widen the scope of the conflict, which it called the 'Global War on Terror'. Sights were set not just on terrorist organisations, but also on those countries which sponsored them and on countries which, according to the Americans, were developing weapons of mass destruction which could potentially fall into the hands of terrorists. The question was not whether, but rather when, Iraq would be included in the new world-wide war.

The decision to attack Iraq was taken at the end of 2001. In early 2002, Washington even considered the option of a rapid attack in the summer of that year.¹⁷ Ultimately, the wish to operate within an international alliance prevented this. From the spring of 2002, President Bush indicated in a number of speeches that he viewed the possibility of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (and the risk of these falling into the wrong hands) as too great a threat to his country in the wake of 9/11. Slowly but surely, a war plan was drawn up in meetings between the White House, the Department of Defense and the military headquarters CENTCOM (Central Command, responsible for the Middle East). The emphasis was on decapitating the Iraqi dictatorship by means of a rapid march on Baghdad. Little thought was given to what should happen afterwards.¹⁸

In the meantime, the Iraqi regime chose to be deliberately vague about its weapons of mass destruction. It was playing a bluffing game. By sowing doubt about whether it had chemical and biological weapons, and about the possible development programme for an atomic bomb, Saddam Hussein and his followers hoped to deter their regional arch-enemy Iran and prevent any domestic uprisings such as those in 1991. However, the

Baath regime made an error of judgement in pursuing this deterrence-by-doubt strategy by misinterpreting the changed geostrategic situation since 9/11. It did not recognise the reversal in thinking that these shocking events had caused in Washington. It was precisely the smokescreen it put up around the development and possible possession of weapons of mass destruction, aimed at keeping its non-us enemies at bay, which now worked like a red rag to the us bull.¹⁹

The Bush administration was very open about its intention to remove the Iraqi regime by means of a “pre-emptive strike”. Three months after 11 September 2001 and while the military operation in Afghanistan was still well underway, Vice-President Cheney dropped hints on the Fox News media channel about a possible next round in the global war on terrorism: “If I were Saddam Hussein, I’d be thinking very carefully about the future, and I would be looking very closely to see what happened to the Taliban in Afghanistan,” he said.²⁰ In his State of the Union address on 29 January 2002, President Bush clustered together the (security) threat of terrorism with the regimes in Iraq, Iran and North Korea in an “Axis of Evil”. He said he believed that the war on terror had only just begun and told his audience that they were in for a long fight. In Bush’s view, the us should be “steadfast” in its pursuit of two objectives: to combat terrorism and prevent terrorists or regimes from threatening the us and the world with nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.²¹ Of all the countries in the “Axis of Evil”, Iraq should be the most worried, Secretary of State Colin Powell confirmed a week later during a hearing in the us Senate. The Secretary reported that the White House was studying “a variety of options” for removing Saddam Hussein’s regime.²²

Senior us officials continued to make these kinds of statements throughout the spring and summer of 2002. In April, when Bush invited British Prime Minister Tony Blair to his ranch in Crawford (Texas), a British television reporter asked the us President about Iraq. “I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go,” the American Commander-in-Chief said. “The worst thing that could happen would be to allow a nation like Iraq, run by Saddam Hussein, to develop weapons of mass destruction, and then team up with terrorist organisations so they can blackmail the world. I’m not going to let that happen.”²³ In August, his National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, told the BBC that the West had to stop Saddam Hussein before he “wreak[s] havoc again on his own population, his neighbours and, if he gets weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them, on all of us”.²⁴ At the end of August, Vice-President Cheney

gave the strongest indication yet during a speech to war veterans: "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction [and t]here is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, against our allies, and against us."²⁵ For this reason, Cheney asserted, "The risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action".²⁶

Over the course of 2002, everything possible was done to convince the American people and the rest of the world of the threat posed by the Iraqi regime, and of the need to oust it. In doing so, the us government exaggerated intelligence data. It made the supposed possession of weapons of mass destruction by the Iraqi dictator the *casus belli* of a premeditated war, in spite of a severe lack of hard evidence. The decision-making process was dominated by wishful thinking and manipulation. The us intelligence services, especially the CIA, were under great pressure from the White House and the Pentagon to produce the required information.²⁷ Their often dubious and inflated intelligence estimates were put to use in an extensive media campaign.²⁸ The us even elevated improbable suspicions about supposed connections between the Iraqi regime and Al-Qaeda into facts.²⁹

Parallel to the operational planning phase, us forces started preparing the future battlefield. Under the guise of conducting international supervision in the southern no-fly zone, pressure was increased on the Iraqi armed forces. Instead of eliminating specific enemy installations when attacked, as had been the case in previous years, patrol aircraft started taking out a more comprehensive set of targets. This meant that the us ground down the Iraqi command, control and communications networks which would support the defensive effort in the event of an invasion. The British refused to participate because they believed that the applicable UN resolutions did not sufficiently justify the bombings. The air campaign, which took place largely out of sight, was dubbed Operation Southern Focus and meant that the war against Iraq in fact began with a series of air strikes as early as in 2002.³⁰

The us State Department in Washington around this time started to point out a large hiatus in the military blueprints: the post-war phase. This aspect was mostly brushed aside with the assumption that the existing Iraqi administrative system, including army and police, would keep the country running under us control in the weeks following a ceasefire. The Department of Defense foresaw a brief transitional period. They were not so certain of this at the State Department however. The United States would occupy Iraq and would therefore have to run it, Secretary of State Powell argued. How did the us intend to do so? Toppling Saddam Hussein's

regime automatically created responsibility for building a secure Iraq in the long term. International support and assistance needed to be sought. Together with their British ally, the State Department pressed for a formal approach to the Iraq question via the United Nations.³¹

Renewed inspections

Although the decision to remove Saddam Hussein and his dictatorship had already been taken, the United States turned to the UN for international support. In November 2002, at the initiative of the US and the UK and following long negotiations with the French in particular, the Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1441. The declaration stated that Iraq had failed to comply with earlier international demands. The country was given one last chance to destroy its weapons of mass destruction and related development programmes. The Security Council compelled Iraq to give weapons inspectors from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) – the successor to UNSCOM – unconditional access and demanded that it allow them to do their work unhindered. The resolution also stated that the Iraqi government itself had to provide full disclosure about its arms programmes within thirty days. The next major milestone would be a progress report by UNMOVIC, sixty days after the arrival of the inspectors in Iraq.³² The inspections were led by Swedish diplomat and former Minister for Foreign Affairs Hans Blix, head of UNMOVIC, and by Mohammed El Baradei, the Egyptian director of the IAEA.

After an absence of four years, UN inspectors returned to Iraqi soil at the end of November 2002. In early December, Iraq reported as required on its weapons programmes. The twelve-thousand page declaration was in fact a denial that the country had any remaining programme of any significance. The US immediately saw this as a sign that the Iraqi government was trying to avoid full disclosure. The American view was that Saddam Hussein and his clique were continuing their old tricks of sabotage and deception. As far as Washington was concerned, Iraq had had its last chance.³³ The US was also very dissatisfied with the way the UN inspectors set to work. It thought that UNMOVIC and the IAEA were too hesitant and did not persevere long enough. The Bush administration was afraid of becoming bogged down in a never-ending process of inspections and diplomacy. However, it was alone in this opinion. Few other countries at this point shared the conclusion that war was inevitable. This did not prevent Washington from making concrete war preparations together with its British ally. Large numbers of American and

British troops and military material were already on their way to Kuwait, the starting point for the future invasion.

In December 2002, Generals Tommy Franks – commander of CENTCOM – and David McKiernan – commander of the land forces for the planned invasion – brought about a late, significant change to the US plan of attack. They decided that the air and land campaigns would be conducted simultaneous. This time there would be no prior bombing campaign lasting several weeks, as had been the case in the 1991 Gulf War, but an immediate march on Baghdad. The Pentagon, especially Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, hoped to keep the invasion force as small as possible, but General McKiernan requested and was ultimately given more units. He considered these troops necessary for both the sustainability of his force and the occupation phase once the fighting was over.

The plan brought no end to the controversy surrounding the post-war phase, however. Rumsfeld continued to press for a minimum number of troops and for dismantling the invasion force as quickly as possible after combat operations ended. This contrasted with the assessments made by the military planners at CENTCOM and elsewhere, who foresaw a lack of manpower for preserving public order and security after the fighting phase. McKiernan and his colleagues therefore had to count on the rapid deployment of military units supplied by allies to fill the gap after the fall of Baghdad. Moreover, they expected the Iraqi security apparatus to remain intact and to continue to be able to provide support.³⁴

In the meantime the diplomatic search for international support for a war, via the UN, was not going as the US and UK had hoped. The diplomatic debate turned into a tug-of-war between the allies and the other permanent Security Council member states. It was clear that the UN weapons inspectors in the field were not receiving the cooperation from Iraq which they required.³⁵ At the end of January and early February 2003, this led to the question being raised whether the inspections should be continued. The international community was divided. On the one hand, the US and UK thought the time had come for military action. Powerful countries such as Russia, France and Germany opposed a war and argued in favour of continuing the work. They believed Iraq could be disarmed properly by the weapons inspectors, i.e. in a peaceful manner.

On 5 February, US Secretary of State Powell addressed the Security Council in an attempt to bring it round to the US-UK position. Iraq was deceiving the international community, the former general claimed, and clearly concealing its armament programmes. Powell presented a list of supposed evidence

to support this view. The only possible conclusion for the international community was that the regime in Baghdad had wasted its last chance, he stated. The Security Council had to pave the way for military action.

The war coalition, which included countries such as Spain, Italy, Poland and Australia, attempted to obtain formal approval for an attack on Iraq. Yet when the faction led by France, Russia and Germany – countries which were in favour of longer and more intensive inspections – indicated that it would block such a resolution and in doing so form a majority in the UN against the US standpoint, the ‘coalition of the willing’ around the United States decided to push ahead without UN approval. Most countries in this Coalition, such as the Netherlands, supported the invasion merely politically or indirectly. The United Kingdom, Poland and Australia were the only ones providing ground troops.

As war became inevitable at this stage, the planning for the occupation of Iraq became more definite. It was decided in Washington that the Department of Defense would take on this task. General McKiernan and his staff drew up plans for their units to support an allied occupation authority in the post-war situation, via either a civilian administration or a specially created military headquarters which would work together with an Iraqi interim government.³⁶ For this so-called ‘stabilisation phase’, a Post War Planning Office was set up. It was headed by former general Jay Garner, who was tasked with forming an occupation authority. His agenda contained a wide range of civilian tasks: maintaining public utilities, paying Iraqi civil servants and security troops, providing humanitarian aid, protecting essential infrastructure, creating new political institutions and numerous occupation tasks that tended towards state-building.³⁷ The US thus recognised the reality of having to create a new Iraq, but had only general plans while providing few resources. In March 2003 Garner arrived in Kuwait with a small team (his office was now called the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance – ORHA) to await the moment at which Iraq would be a country occupied by Coalition troops.³⁸

War in Iraq

Operation Iraqi Freedom commenced on the night of 19 March 2003 with an air raid on the suspected location of Saddam Hussein to the south of Baghdad. The bombs missed the dictator, but were the opening salvo for what President Bush called “military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger”.³⁹ After the failed

attempt to remove the head of the Baath regime, a rapid attack on the heart of the dictatorship followed. A devastating bombing campaign by allied air forces – dubbed ‘shock and awe’ by Coalition war propaganda – and a simultaneous advance by a fast manoeuvring ground force led to Iraqi resistance collapsing in just under three weeks.⁴⁰

While the spearheads of the US ground forces – one army and one Marine division – raced northwards through the basin of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, a large part of the Iraqi army evaporated. Many forces deserted their posts and quietly headed for home. The greatest resistance came from irregular Baath loyalists, known as Saddam Fedayeen, and from foreign – mostly Arab – fighters and, closer to Baghdad, the elite troops of the Republican Guard. These armed pillars of the dictatorship were, however, comprehensively defeated by the Coalition Forces in an unequal battle. On 9 April, the Coalition Forces conquered Baghdad. One day earlier, the southern Iraqi city of Basra fell to the British following a two-week siege. Subsequently, Coalition troops fanned out across the country to eliminate the final pockets of resistance and to occupy Iraq.

The only Dutch military unit present in the region at this point was a detachment of air defence batteries in Turkey, which borders Iraq to the north. Remembering the Iraqi missiles fired on Israel and Saudi Arabia in 1991, in early February NATO member Turkey had requested three units equipped with Patriot air defence missiles. The Dutch government agreed to this deployment on a bilateral basis. Two Patriot batteries were deployed to the southern Turkish air base at Diyarbakir, a third was positioned close to the town of Batman. The detachment, from the Royal Netherlands Air Force’s Guided Missile Group, had at its disposal two types of missile: its own PAC-2 and a more modern version, which was made available by Germany for the duration of the operation.⁴¹ The Dutch units, totalling 370 military personnel, were operational as of the start of March 2003. They saw no action during the war as Turkey did not come under attack. The deployment ended on 16 April. The majority of the military personnel returned to the Netherlands on 1 May.⁴²

On that same date, US President Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. The Baath regime had been deposed and its leaders and frontmen were either dead, imprisoned or had fled. The US now planned to withdraw from Iraq as quickly as possible. The Bush administration had a well-known aversion to peacekeeping and nation-building and planned to leave the occupation and stabilisation of Iraq to troops from other foreign powers: in the south led by the British, in the centre by the Poles, and around

Baghdad and in the north by a force comprising Arab allies from the Persian Gulf region. A new Iraqi government was to be set up within thirty to sixty days. In September, the US occupying force could then be reduced to about 30,000 men. Until that time, the idea was to restrict the deployment of US units for the stabilisation of the country to a minimum.⁴³

This plan quickly proved to be a fantasy however, as there was very little outside help. Few Western allies sent forces and most Arab countries remained on the sidelines. The US and UK clearly paid the price for their unilateral behaviour prior to the war. In May and June, the occupying forces were spread thinly across the vast operational area while combat operations and weeks of lawlessness and plunder left the Iraqi state apparatus in ruins. Coalition troops – insofar as they were able – did not sufficiently fill the power vacuum that emerged in the wake of battle in most parts of Iraq. Moreover, the invasion force was confronted with the first stirrings of a resistance movement organised by the Baathists, who had gone underground, and by groups of foreign Muslim extremists.

As the occupying authorities in Iraq, the Americans and the British inherited a bankrupt and impoverished country. They were now confronted with their inadequate planning. The general chaos and anarchy quickly turned the mood. Former general Garner and his ORHA were out of touch with the situation during the first chaotic weeks, as were the US and British ground troops. The Coalition was forced to change its policy. The US sidelined Garner and appointed diplomat L. Paul ('Jerry') Bremer as the highest administrator in Iraq, at the head of what the US and the UK now called the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). In his capacity as custodian of the country, Bremer's task was, in short, to employ state-building methods to help post-war Iraq become a viable state again.

The Netherlands: political rather than military support

One of the allies eligible to give a helping hand in this critical phase was the Netherlands. Since the start of the Iraq crisis in 2002, the Dutch government had pursued a policy similar to that of the British, but without a concrete military contribution. The Dutch position was that Saddam Hussein's regime needed to be tackled, preferably via the UN, but if necessary without it. In adopting this policy, the Dutch government positioned itself squarely behind the Coalition.

When the issue became pressing in September 2002, Minister for Foreign Affairs Jaap de Hoop Scheffer explained to Parliament that the

Dutch government shared the view that Saddam Hussein posed “a life-sized threat to the region and beyond”.⁴⁴ The Minister argued that the “legitimacy for action [lay] ... firmly embedded in the issue of weapons of mass destruction”. He stressed that the required disarmament of Iraq should preferably be conducted through the UN Security Council. At the same time, he believed that the international community could not afford to be dependent on the veto of one or more uncooperative permanent Security Council members. He therefore advanced what he called the “formal legal argument” that intervention was possible on the basis of existing, older Security Council resolutions. New resolutions would be welcome, but were not essential.⁴⁵ De Hoop Scheffer emphatically repeated this viewpoint during the debate on 19 November 2002, in which the by now outgoing Minister and the Dutch Parliament discussed resolution 1441, which gave Iraq a final chance to provide disclosure.⁴⁶

That same month, the US approached the Netherlands with a request for support. This entailed making available Patriot air defence systems and assistance in transporting military material to the Middle East via Dutch territory. The appeal also included the request to the Dutch to make “an active contribution of some kind if action was taken against Iraq”, Minister Henk Kamp – caretaker VVD Minister of Defence in the outgoing government⁴⁷ – told Parliament some weeks later.⁴⁸ The request from the US embassy, dated 15 November and subsequently reiterated by US Deputy Secretary of State Marc Grossman during a visit to The Hague on 5 December, in fact encompassed a very concrete list of Dutch military assets for possible combat operations on Iraqi territory.⁴⁹ The wish list included military resources such as air assault and mechanised infantry combat units, F-16 fighter jets with precision guided weapons, frigates, minesweepers, submarines, maritime patrol aircraft, Apache attack helicopters and transport aircraft.⁵⁰

The Dutch government granted the US an overflight permit and permission for the transit of US army material and personnel via Dutch territory.⁵¹ It did not comply with the request for a contribution to any combat operation, however. An appeal from the British to send the Dutch First Marine Battalion and the amphibious transport ship HNLMS *Rotterdam* to the region as part of the UK/NL Amphibious Force was also rejected.⁵² This was due to a strategic analysis by officials at the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs having concluded that planning the participation of Dutch units in potential offensive operations against Iraq was not – yet – expedient for the Netherlands as long as uncertainty remained about the legitimacy and timing of the Coalition’s invasion.⁵³

This rather non-committal policy was the result of the complex and rapid evolution of international events, as well as the specific political situation in the Netherlands that winter. The government had resigned in October 2002 as a result of squabbles within one of the governing parties, the political newcomer LPF. General elections were held in January 2003. From February onwards, the largest government party, CDA (44 of the 150 seats), held talks on forming a new government with the biggest winner of the elections, opposition party PvdA (42 seats). The Labour party was very critical of the US and UK policy on Iraq and thought that UN inspectors should be given sufficient time to do their jobs. It considered UN Security Council approval not just desirable for further (military) action, but essential.⁵⁴

In spite of the changed political relations, the caretaker coalition government of the CDA, LPF and VVD parties meanwhile continued to pursue the Anglo-American policy line, as war without the explicit mandate of the UN Security Council became increasingly more likely. For instance, the Dutch government took the data from the presentation by Secretary of State Powell on 5 February 2003 in the Security Council “exceedingly seriously,” as CDA Minister De Hoop Scheffer wrote in a letter to the Second Chamber. Because “much of what Powell has revealed has been known in intelligence circles for some time and is in line with what Dutch intelligence sources have shown”.⁵⁵

The Minister claimed that he could not go into detail about the nature and origin of this intelligence, suggesting that Dutch ministers possessed independent information via their own services (the Military Intelligence and Security Service, MIVD, and the General Intelligence and Security Service, AIVD) confirming the US-UK allegations against Iraq. However, an official inquiry would later show that the Netherlands was guided almost completely by (biased) US and British intelligence on this matter. According to a 2010 inquiry report, Dutch ministers also used the analyses provided by the AIVD and MIVD selectively to serve their political goal of loyalty to the US and the UK. For instance, the Dutch cabinet neglected to inform Parliament about specific “misgivings which quickly arose about the reliability of the evidence presented by Powell”. Information from reports by UNMOVIC was used selectively as well.⁵⁶

At this stage, on the eve of battle, the Dutch government did not rule out participation “in some form or other” in a possible military action against Iraq either. Defence Minister Kamp told the Second Chamber on 19 February 2003 that he and his colleagues would make an “independent assessment” if the weapons of mass destruction, which

Kamp was convinced existed, were not “handed over” and the threat posed by Saddam’s regime was not “eliminated”.⁵⁷ The government kept open the option of sending emergency response forces. It also considered the possible ‘relabelling’ of military forces which were already deployed to the region as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan), such as a frigate and a submarine.⁵⁸ While Security Council members spent February and March wrangling over a new resolution on the use of force, the Dutch government concluded on the basis of reports by UNMOVIC and the IAEA that it remained doubtful whether “Saddam Hussein [was] willing to do what the global community demanded of him”.⁵⁹ Minister for Foreign Affairs De Hoop Scheffer asserted on 18 March, the day before the war began, that the lack of consensus in the UN Security Council should not result in the Iraqi regime being left in peace. The Netherlands therefore supported the US and the UK when they took unilateral action.⁶⁰

This cabinet decision immediately caused a crisis in the already difficult talks between the CDA and PvdA on forming a new government. The CDA and both other governing parties VVD and LPF supported the imminent invasion; the opposition did not. Wouter Bos, leader of intended government participant PvdA, was critical of the way in which the UN Security Council was being sidelined. In the view of Bos and the Labour party, this was “the wrong decision at the wrong time”.⁶¹ Nevertheless, a compromise was eventually reached. The Dutch government would not make “an active military contribution” due to the lack of support in the Netherlands in general and as a concession to the opposition and in particular the PvdA.⁶²

The caretaker Balkenende I government was now free to communicate resolutely about the desired hard line on Iraq. In doing so, however, government ministers did have to conceal some doubts. In particular with respect to the legitimacy of the war, opinions were not as solid as they appeared to the outside world.⁶³ On 28 January 2003, for instance, the Ministry of Defence’s Directorate of Legal Affairs reported to Minister Kamp that a new UN resolution containing a mandate from the Security Council was required to make an attack on Iraq legal. The reasoning propagated by the government that existing resolutions were sufficiently legitimate did not stand up to scrutiny, the Defence ministry’s lawyers concluded. They reported that careful reading of the resolutions showed that only the UN Security Council itself, and therefore not just one or two of its members, was authorised to establish a violation and to determine any consequences. Fellow lawyers at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also failed to see a valid mandate for the intended use of force in existing resolutions.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the Dutch government decided to keep up appearances and supported US-UK unilateralism.⁶⁵

On 18 March, Prime Minister Balkenende again explained the reasoning during a heated debate in Parliament about the imminent war. In his opinion, the authorisation to use force could indeed be found in the 'old' resolutions 678 of 1990 (the legal basis for the liberation of Kuwait), 687 of 1991 (the conditional ceasefire after the First Gulf War) and 1441 of 2002 (the 'last chance' resolution on disarmament). As it had since become clear, Balkenende claimed, "that Iraq [had] not cooperated actively as obliged by resolution 1441 and the Security Council had failed to reach a consensus on a [new] resolution, the way was open for UN member states to take the necessary measures [by themselves] to enforce compliance on the basis of resolution 678".⁶⁶ The Prime Minister also referred to the fact that the previous Dutch government had supported the Desert Fox bombing campaign in 1998 using the same arguments. He regretted the fact that a unilateral 'reactivation' of old UN resolutions had to lead to war, but in his view "the essence" was "the disarmament of an aggressor which possesses weapons of mass destruction".⁶⁷

Into the desert

When announcing Dutch support for the invasion, Minister De Hoop Scheffer at the same time expressed the intention that the Netherlands would focus on the post-combat phase of operations, and not just politically. "In this respect, the desirability of a military contribution is also being considered," he wrote.⁶⁸ Prime Minister Balkenende added in his statement to Parliament that as far as he was concerned the Netherlands would actively participate in winning the peace. "The Netherlands is fully prepared to contribute under the flag of the United Nations," the Prime Minister said. At that time, the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs were already busy considering Dutch participation.⁶⁹ According to the head of the Defence Staff's Operations Division it was clear that participation would be challenging, due to the complex relationship with the occupying powers, the fact that the CPA was not yet established, the unclarity on the nature of Iraqi government structures and the lack of UN involvement. The Dutch contribution would be embedded in the British division that deployed in the south of Iraq.⁷⁰ The Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), Lieutenant Admiral Luuk Kroon, decided on the basis of availability that the core of the Dutch contribution would consist of an infantry battalion of the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps.⁷¹

On Friday 11 April, just two days after the fall of the Iraqi capital Baghdad, daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* reported that the government wanted to make available “about six hundred military personnel for an international ‘stabilisation force’ in Iraq”.⁷² The article stressed that Minister Kamp had not said a word about the intended Dutch contribution to what *de Volkskrant* called a ‘peacekeeping force’ during a debate in the Second Chamber on the previous day. It added that Minister for Foreign Affairs De Hoop Scheffer had expressed a preference for the deployment of military forces with a sound UN mandate, or possibly within a NATO operation, and noted: “Parliament has so far not been averse to a Dutch military contribution after the war ends. In the opinion of the government and Parliament, the UN will [have to] play a key role in the post-Saddam Hussein era.”⁷³

The Ministers informed Parliament by letter that same day that the government had decided “to investigate the desirability and possibility of a Dutch military contribution to a stabilisation force in Iraq”.⁷⁴ To this end, among other things, the Defence Staff conducted a “strategic reconnaissance”. From 8-12 May, an inventory team, led by the Head of the Operational Planning Division, travelled through the south of Iraq to review the potential deployment options for the Dutch Marine battle group in the British division sector. Lieutenant Colonel Dick Swijgman, commander of the First Marine Battalion, the unit which was to be deployed first, was a member of this team.

At this stage, there were several options on the table. One was deployment under the command of a British brigade, either in Maysan province near the Iranian border or at As Zubayah to the south of the city of Basra. Another option was deployment to Al Muthanna province, with two variants: either under the command of a Spanish brigade, or as an independent battle group with a direct line of command to British division headquarters.⁷⁵ If the latter option were chosen, the Dutch operation would start on 1 August, the date on which a US Marine battalion in Al Muthanna was due to leave. The province would then be part of the area of operations of the newly-created, UK-led Multinational Division South-East (MND South-East) of the Coalition Forces.

The Dutch reconnaissance team visited the British division staff near the city of Basra, the US Marines in Al Muthanna and the British Duke of Wellington’s Regiment in As Zubayah. The team was told that the population in the south of Iraq at that time generally had a positive or neutral attitude towards the occupation. It was noted, however, that this could change if food or fuel supplies were to come to a halt or the restoration

of public utilities were delayed. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman reported that the allied forces devoted a great deal of time to “static security tasks” (relating to buildings, infrastructure, supply lines, as well as mass graves and locations which might be connected to weapons of mass destruction) and patrols.⁷⁶

The Dutch inventory team compared the two most likely deployment options: one in Basra province and the other in Al Muthanna. In the opinion of the team, the benefit of deployment under a British brigade in As Zubayah near Basra was that the Dutch unit would receive logistical support from the British and would therefore require fewer personnel for this itself. Other benefits included proximity to a British military hospital, short supply lines from the sea and airports to the deployment area, and the small requirement for engineer support as the unit could immediately move into a camp constructed by the British. The Al Muthanna option was in fact tougher with respect to logistics and personnel. The reconnaissance team did, however, estimate the security threat to be higher in Basra than in sparsely populated Al Muthanna. The advantage of the latter option would also be that the Netherlands could independently oversee its ‘own province’, and by doing so would conduct a higher profile operation. Yet, as Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman wrote, his preference on the basis of the comparison was for the, in military terms, more challenging option of As Zubayah. He advised his superiors accordingly.⁷⁷

In The Hague the responsible policy makers nevertheless came to prefer the option of an independent Dutch operation in Al Muthanna. First, the British had urged the Al Muthanna option at a coordination meeting in London on 30 April.⁷⁸ Second, the idea appealed to many in The Hague because, as mentioned above, an independent operation would make the Dutch effort internationally much more visible. The more autonomous and visible the operation the better. The enthusiasm for the Al Muthanna option was so great that within the Defence Staff the inventory mission of May was generally perceived as chiefly serving to investigate this scenario.⁷⁹ Third, a security analysis backed the choice of Al Muthanna. In Basra and its surroundings, a Dutch unit could find itself in a complex urban environment with all the risks that that entailed. The Basra region was also strategically more important (and therefore more vulnerable) due to the oil and gas fields and corresponding installations, its access to the Persian Gulf and its proximity to neighbouring Iran. The Defence Staff therefore recommended opting for deployment in the less complicated environment of Al Muthanna. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman

and his men were told to prepare “on the basis of the risk analysis and political profile” for an operation as an independent battle group in the remote desert province.⁸⁰

In order to study the details of this type of deployment, groups of military specialists conducted tactical and technical reconnaissance in late May and early June. In the meantime, Minister Kamp told Parliament on 20 May that the Dutch government, “in view of its caretaker status, the progress of government formation talks and the fact that the desirability and feasibility study has not yet been completed,” had decided “to leave decision-making on the stabilisation force in Iraq to the next government”. This administration, which became known as the *Balkenende* II government, was sworn in on 27 May 2003. On 6 June, it approved the military deployment to Iraq, in spite of the fact that it had since become clear that the UN would play only a minor role.

Ministers Kamp and De Hoop Scheffer – who both returned to their former posts – informed Parliament that the Dutch contribution to the Coalition was to comprise “a battalion of Marines and associated support units”.⁸¹ The government announced that the Dutch unit would be stationed in Al Muthanna province “at the request of the British”. As this region came under the responsibility of British-led MND South-East, the “operational line of command [would] ... [run] via the British division headquarters and subsequently via US headquarters in Baghdad to the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which coordinates military direction”. The Netherlands based its participation, in line with the previously formulated objective of desired UN authorisation, on Security Council Resolution 1483, which had been adopted a few weeks earlier on 22 May. In this resolution, the Council welcomed the willingness of member states to contribute “personnel, equipment and other resources” to “stability and security in Iraq”. The Council also appealed to member states and organisations to assist the people of Iraq in reconstructing their country.⁸²

Although the resolution did not mention the creation and status of a multinational force, as the Netherlands would have liked and as is common in these cases, the Dutch government’s view was that the text contained a sufficient “political and legal basis for participation in the stabilisation force” that was created under the guidance of the occupying powers in Iraq.⁸³

The Dutch government furthermore stated that its contribution would focus on “assisting in the reconstruction of Iraq by creating a secure and stable environment” as well as the support of “specific tasks for which the administrative responsibility” would lie with the CPA, such as humanitarian

actions, reconstruction and the provision of security for other Coalition partners.⁸⁴ Although Dutch military personnel would be full members of the occupying force's military organisation, the Dutch government emphasised the explicit reservation in UN resolution 1483 determining "that countries which provide this type of contribution are [themselves] not defined as occupying powers".⁸⁵ In doing so, the Netherlands distanced itself from its major allies. The politically-desired status of 'non-occupier' was translated into two distinct caveats, laid down in a Memorandum of Understanding with the UK: under no circumstances would Dutch military personnel be allowed to conduct administrative tasks (as was common elsewhere in the country due to the lack of sufficient CPA personnel), nor would they be allowed to take the lead with respect to law enforcement. The Dutch battle groups therefore conducted no executive police tasks and were for instance prohibited from interning people.

The Netherlands' desire to profile its military contribution as being separate from that of the Coalition which fought against Iraq was also expressed by the distinctive, individual Dutch name for the operation. As the UK and the US had used the same code name for the occupation phase as they did for the spring offensive (Operation Iraqi Freedom for the US and Operation Telic for the UK), CDS Kroon decided that this was unsuitable for the Dutch. A solution was found in the informal terms 'stabilisation operation' and 'stabilisation force'. In the legal agreements with the British, the name Stabilisation Force Iraq, at times abbreviated to SFOR, was increasingly used in an official sense. As there was obvious potential confusion with the NATO operation in Bosnia of the same name, the Dutch Defence Staff introduced the acronym SFIR.⁸⁶

The government's letter to Parliament did not explain in any further detail how the separate status in Iraq stressed by the Netherlands related to the formal command structure, either in the military line of command of the allied force or with respect to the CPA. The government did state, however, that a Committee of Contributors would be set up for the British sector, which was aimed at enabling "those countries which provided troops to be sufficiently involved in determining general politico-military policy ... and the exchange of information".⁸⁷ The "stabilisation force" in which the Netherlands was to participate, "should play an essential support role". The idea was to conduct the operation in such a way as to enable a rapid handover of responsibilities to the Iraqis.⁸⁸

The government's interpretation of the new military operation in Iraq was not readily accepted by everyone. During a number of hearings in

Parliament on 19 June, for instance, Professor of International Law Nico Schrijver stated that he regarded Resolution 1483 as sufficient legitimation for the planned multinational stabilisation force and the Dutch participation in it, but pointed out that the text contained no specific appointment or mandate for such a force. His interpretation of the situation therefore was that it was not the UN Security Council but the British and Americans who would determine the rules (including instructions on the use of force) for the Dutch deployment. The principle for the Dutch contribution therefore did not lie in explicit *authorisation* by the UN Security Council for this specific operation, but in fact in the *recognition* by the Council of the US-UK occupation of Iraq as a *fait accompli*.⁸⁹

Military expert Frank van Kappen, a retired Marine Corps Major General, also called SFIR a mission that differed sharply “from the usual spectrum”. He called it “unprecedented, whereby in my opinion the key point is that operations will be conducted under the command of two occupying powers which have been formally identified as such by the Security Council”. Van Kappen implied that the decision on the deployment failed to comply with the government’s previous objective of a ‘key role’ for the UN. The SFIR mission was therefore certainly not a peace operation in the classic sense – whereby peace support troops adopt an impartial role on behalf of the international community. The general referred to the risks to Dutch forces who, whichever way one looked at it, would be “the only visible component” and “visible representatives” of the occupying authorities in their area of operations. He asserted that if the CPA were to function poorly, it would be military personnel, including the Dutch, who would pay the price. Local Iraqis “would not give a damn that military personnel bore no direct responsibility for this”.⁹⁰

Ultimately, these complications, which would strongly determine the nature of the Dutch operation, made little difference to Parliament. Only two small left-wing parties voted against participation in the Coalition’s stabilisation force. In spite of harbouring major doubts, opposition party pvda largely shared the idea that a new reconstruction phase had started in Iraq. The sharp distinction created in the UN Security Council resolution and stressed by the Dutch government between the occupying and non-occupying powers within the Coalition – a first in international law – was accepted as political reality by all those who voted in favour. On 26 June 2003, a majority in the Second Chamber approved the government decision to deploy a battle group to Al Muthanna in Iraq.

Party to the conflict

In the summer of 2003, the Netherlands discovered a new, fashionable term when it came to describing its planned post-invasion contribution to the occupation of Iraq: stabilisation force. Press officers and journalists frequently used the term once it had been generally accepted in the official communications between government and Parliament. The undefined term conveniently left open for all parties whether this deployment was a peace operation (in the sense of a classical, impartial peace support deployment), a more robust and not necessarily neutral peace enforcement operation, perhaps a post-conflict peacebuilding operation, or participation in or support for an occupation.

The Netherlands therefore did not really know how to view its own contribution to the multinational campaign in Iraq. In spite of minimal commitment from the UN, the Dutch government, the Ministry of Defence and – displaying remarkably little criticism – the media constantly classed the new operation as a ‘normal’ crisis response operation. This classification was misleading, however, and ignored the fact that the stabilisation force for Iraq had been created and led by the countries which had invaded and occupied it in March – without there being any agreed UN mandate to do so. Moreover, there was also the question whether the armed conflict in Iraq was indeed over. Many predicted an armed uprising and civil war.

The crisis in Iraq certainly did not result in an international follow-up operation led by the UN (as the Netherlands and others had hoped and argued for). This placed the Netherlands – which specifically wanted to participate – in a dilemma. How could a Dutch military contingent join the alliance formed by the US and the UK to occupy Iraq and yet adopt the desired role of a non-occupying peacekeeping force? Actually, this was impossible, even though the government tried to ignore the problem by coming up with a rather contrived interpretation of UN resolution 1483. The government in its letter to Parliament on SFIR, however, could not conceal the fact that the Netherlands was participating in the occupation phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Experts made that perfectly obvious in the parliamentary hearings. It would therefore have been clearer if the Netherlands had adopted an open stance and admitted that – just like during the combat phase in March and April – it was a full member of the Coalition and therefore party to the conflict.

2

'A sandpit under Dutch control'

The Americans hand over command

On the morning of Thursday 31 July 2003, a modest change of command ceremony was held at a disused Iraqi railway workshop on the edge of the city of As Samawah, where the town meets the desert. For the occasion the building to the south of Al Muthanna's capital had been decorated with Iraqi, Dutch and us flags, and with the regimental colours of the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Regiment of the us Marine Corps. For the past three months, the run-down building had been the headquarters of this Marine unit, which had served in the most forward lines of the advance on Baghdad in March and April and had subsequently been sent south to maintain law and order in the vast and sparsely populated desert region. Now, the commander of '2/5 Marines', Lieutenant Colonel Daniel O'Donahue, handed over responsibility for Al Muthanna to the commander of the Dutch First Marine Corps Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman. In the presence of many Iraqi and foreign dignitaries, the usual praise was expressed by all sides. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman opened his speech with a couple of sentences in Arabic, a gesture rewarded by the Iraqis with a round of applause and given much attention by the local television station Samawah tv. The formalities lasted forty-five minutes. It was half past nine in the morning and the height of summer in Iraq. Soon thereafter the temperature would rise to 50 degrees Celsius.

Immediately after the ceremony, O'Donahue had a final meeting with Sheikh Sami, the Iraqi interim governor with whom the American – in his capacity as occupying authority – had done most of his business. The

Marine commander was displeased. After the invasion, in April, Sami Azara Al Majun of the Al Ghanim tribe had returned to Southern Iraq from a twelve-year exile in London. He had been appointed by the us, but had higher ambitions than administering the peripheral province of Al Muthanna. Sami hoped to become a government minister in Baghdad. As a result, he increasingly left the administration of Al Muthanna to his younger brother, Khaled. Sheikh Khaled was known to be highly corrupt and behaved like a gangster.¹ A few months earlier, with a view to pleasing Sami, the us Marines had issued the brother with a large number of gun permits, something which O'Donahue had soon come to regret. Khaled had even moved into the governor's residence without the commander's permission and was increasingly in charge of affairs in the province.

The farewell meeting between O'Donahue and Sami was about Khaled's behaviour. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman and his political adviser, diplomat Michel Rentenaar, were also present. Rentenaar had worked in several embassies in the Middle East and spoke fluent Arabic. His linguistic and cultural knowledge of the Arab world would soon prove to be invaluable to the Dutch mission. He had already spent over a week working intensively with the Americans and had witnessed the relationship between the occupiers and their Iraqi frontman deteriorate. The final meeting escalated into a tough confrontation and further worsened the difficult relations of the previous weeks. The domineering way in which O'Donahue threw his weight around spoke volumes about his power as a military representative of the occupation authority and his power to appoint and dismiss officials. The Lieutenant Colonel's demeanour made the Dutch reflect on how they themselves could or should carry out their assignment – with a different status and a more restricted mandate – to create a safe and stable environment in Al Muthanna over the next few months.

In a pointed monologue, O'Donahue told Sheikh Sami that his brother Khaled had to relinquish his unofficial post immediately and vacate the governor's residence. Sami reacted evasively, dismissing most of his brother's alleged misdeeds as lies while blaming some of his wrongdoings on inexperience. According to Rentenaar this meant that Sami was either ignorant or unreliable, but most likely the latter. The us commander continued to press for Khaled's departure, thereby making the situation very uncomfortable for the Dutch. They also wanted the corrupt brother to leave, but Swijgman and Rentenaar did not want a confrontation with Sami at this stage. The old Sheikh was the most important point of contact in the local administration for the time being, all the more important given

the fact that the Dutch sought to avoid responsibility for administrative tasks. Moreover, Swijgman and Rentenaar did not wish to start their tour with a row with the interim governor or with the arrest of his malafide brother, an option which O'Donahue appeared to be seriously considering. When the American threatened Sami with dismissal halfway through the conversation, his Dutch successor wanted to oppose this openly. O'Donahue's threats were, however, so poorly translated into Arabic, Rentenaar noted, that the Sheikh – who later proved to have a reasonable command of the English language – decided to misunderstand what he did not wish to hear.²

The interim governor eventually agreed to 10 August as the latest date on which his brother should leave. This was the day on which the last of O'Donahue's Marines would leave Al Muthanna. The Dutch did not expect Khaled to comply with the ultimatum, but for the time being they still had Sheikh Sami as their point of contact. "Next Monday evening we are again invited for sheep's head," Rentenaar reported to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague. By then, an interim representative of the CPA, British Colonel Maurice Bulmer, was finally to have arrived. Together with this Colonel – without the Americans – "the umpteenth attempt would be made to get Sheikh Sami to understand the job description of democratic governorship".³

The area of operations

At over 50,000 square kilometres, Al Muthanna was one of the largest provinces in Iraq, and bigger than the Netherlands. With about half a million inhabitants living in relatively small concentrations, it was also the country's most sparsely populated province. At the time of the 2003 invasion, the provincial capital As Samawah had no more than 130,000 inhabitants. The second town, Ar Rumaytha in the north, had about 75,000 inhabitants, and about 60,000 Iraqis lived in the third town, Al Khidr in the east. The south of the province consisted entirely of desert and was largely uninhabited, with the exception of the settlements of As Salman and Al Bussayah and some nomadic tribes.

Years of neglect and subordination by the Baath regime had resulted in a high level of poverty in Al Muthanna, as in most other Shiite areas of (southern) Iraq. The feared humanitarian crisis in the wake of the US-UK invasion did not materialise, however. Clean drinking water was a scarce commodity but food supplies were generally sufficient and the war had

not triggered floods of refugees. There had, however, been heavy fighting in and around As Samawah. From 30 March, a brigade from the US 82nd Airborne Division fought for five days to secure what the Coalition Forces called 'Main Supply Route Jackson', the crucial south-north highway connecting Kuwait to Baghdad which runs right through the city.⁴ During the fighting, several buildings had been destroyed or damaged, including the cement factory which formed the town's main industry and employed three thousand people. The battered factory had subsequently been looted.

As elsewhere in Iraq, weeks of plunder and destruction had resulted in widespread damage to the administrative and economic infrastructure, even more than had been caused by the war. The Republican Guard and paramilitary Fedayeen fighters had been annihilated, had fled or had mingled with the local population. The Baath regime collapsed and the army, police forces and other security organisations had ceased to function. But it was not so much Baath party adherents or Fedayeen who destabilised the area. The main challenges to stability were the faulty infrastructure, poor public facilities, high unemployment and, above all, unbridled criminal activities. Looting, trafficking in arms and drugs, hostage-taking and armed assaults were common. The American Marines who briefed the Dutch reconnaissance team in May admitted that they had little control over the situation, especially at night.⁵

The British had warned the same team that the neutral to friendly attitude of the locals could undergo a rapid reversal if progress was not made in restoring law and order and improving water, fuel and electricity supplies.⁶ While Al Muthanna remained calm for the time being, the situation escalated in Basra in early August. In temperatures of over 50 degrees Celsius, the electricity supply failed and water services largely dried up due to the failure of the electric pumps. Shortages of petrol, diesel and propane for cooking worsened as the refineries repeatedly stopped operating due to the lack of power. Widespread riots broke out, with the people's anger directed at the CPA building and the foreign troops in the city. There were even fatalities. A British officer was killed when his military ambulance was hit by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) – a commonly used antitank weapon. "Stones, RPGs and bullets are the price we are paying" was the sober comment by Major General Graeme Lamb, the commander of MND South-East in the second half of 2003. "It is what we are here for and it's the trade we are in."⁷

Dutch military personnel working in Basra at the divisional headquarters or in support units in the surrounding area were confronted

by the riots. "We cannot go into the town any more as it is too dangerous," a young Marine reported. "Buses carrying military personnel are being shot at Locals have announced that foreigners – so that includes us – are not welcome in their country."⁸ Major Albert Kortenhoeven, who served as liaison officer at the CPA in Basra, wrote:

"Tensions have risen in the town, oil distribution and power supplies are still inadequate after four months of 'occupation' by the coalition forces. The Iraqis have had enough and have taken to the streets. And as in any Arab country, that does not happen without violence. Many car tyres have been set alight in ad hoc roadblocks. There is the constant sound in the town of AK-47 rifles being fired. Most are fired into the air, but some shots have hit the mark, unfortunately leading to three British Royal Military Police colleagues having been killed. The mood in and around Basra is now truly hostile, civilian CPA employees are being evacuated to Kuwait."⁹

When Kortenhoeven, a veteran of previous missions in Cambodia (1992-1993) and Haiti (1994-1996), drove his Land Rover to the CPA building a rioter threw a fist-sized stone through his windscreen. Once he had arrived and washed the shards and splinters of glass from his face and hands, he went to the aid of a severely wounded compound security guard who had stumbled through the gate just behind him. The Nepalese private security employee had been seriously injured during an exchange of fire outside the compound. He died a few minutes later. Although the security situation in Basra improved following these riots, the events were an initial warning to all international troops in the south, including the Dutch in Al Muthanna.

Boots on the ground

The newly-arrived Dutch Marine battalion in Al Muthanna did not share its government's urge to distance itself from the US-UK occupation force. The Dutch enthusiastically adopted the 2/5 Marines' motto, "no better friend, no worse enemy". According to Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman it instilled the right basic attitude into the troops under his command.¹⁰ The battalion commander asserted that "not all aspects of the [Americans'] sometimes very robust action would be adopted", but the Dutch Marines were overall impressed by their predecessors' methods. They regarded the joint patrols at the start of the deployment as highly useful and "a sound

example for future operations”.¹¹ As a friendly gesture, the Dutch named their newly-constructed camp outside As Samawah Camp Smitty, just like the American base at the railway emplacement, after Sergeant Edward Smith, who had been the US battalion’s first fatal casualty of the war, killed in action during the march up to Bagdad.

The abbreviation SFIR for Stabilisation Force Iraq, introduced in political and civil service circles in the Netherlands to distinguish the Dutch contingent from the two Coalition occupying powers, was not used by the Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman and his personnel preferred to refer to themselves as “the first Dutch detachment in Iraq”, abbreviated to 1 (NL) Det Iraq or 1 (NL) Battle Group, shortened to 1 NLBG. They saw themselves as an integral part of the Coalition Forces.¹² At the same time, the detachment was told by the Defence Staff to pursue an expressly Dutch profile. Vehicles were marked with the words ‘The Netherlands’ in English and Arabic, and right at the start of the deployment the Marines distributed leaflets in the colours of the Dutch flag to announce the arrival of the new military unit and to distinguish themselves from their American predecessors. “We deliberately want to be recognisable as a Dutch unit,” Swijgman told journalists travelling with them. “The local people will be able to see a clear difference between the troops from the different countries.”¹³

Soon after the change of command, 1 NLBG started patrolling independently in As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah, the only two locations to which the unit had deployed at that time. Initial impressions of As Samawah were not entirely positive. “It looked like a big rubbish dump,” according to a young Marine who was on his first overseas deployment.¹⁴ It was obvious to all that the area was overwhelmingly poor. Yet apart from the large impoverished residential districts with open sewers, the Dutch also saw large villas in and around the town. Daily life was mostly played out on the streets. In the town centre, a market was held each working day and there were children everywhere calling out “mister, mister”. Carts drawn by donkeys wove in and out of traffic between old Japanese cars. Quite often, men walked around openly carrying firearms and in the evening gunfire could regularly be heard.¹⁵

The first patrols conducted by the Dutch took place without any notable incidents. However, Iraqis approached the Marines right from the start to tell them that they needed to display a greater physical presence.¹⁶ Before, the Americans had been more visible than the Dutch. Their presence had promoted a sense of security among the inhabitants

of the two towns. Commander Swijgman took the complaint to heart, as he believed it struck to the core of his operation. In his orders, he had emphasised the importance of a seamless transition between 2/5 Marines and 1 NLBG. Yet a gap had apparently arisen.¹⁷ This was due to the smaller size of his contingent and the difference in mandate.

The influence of 2/5 Marines had been confined to As Samawah – where the American presence had comprised two infantry companies and a company of military police (MP) – and Ar Rumaythah, where an infantry company had set up a temporary base in the local football stadium. The Dutch adopted this set-up and established a third company location near the town of Al Khidr. They therefore did more with fewer personnel. Shortly after the change of command, 1 NLBG had fewer than 800 military personnel, while the US reinforced battalion had had almost double that, at 1,500.¹⁸ Even when the unit was complete, Dutch infantry capacity was rather small.¹⁹ A full Dutch Marine battalion could deploy only twelve platoons for operations. A standard Marine platoon comprised 27 infantrymen, and four of these platoons were permanently tasked with guarding the camps. In addition, 1 NLBG kept two platoons ready as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) in order to provide support in case of emergencies anywhere in the province at any time. This meant that under normal circumstances there were only six platoons containing just over 160 Marines for daily patrols.

There was also a considerable difference in capacity among the support units, and in resources and authorities. One good example was the 25-strong Marechaussee (military police) platoon, which relieved a complete company of 158 US MPS. The tasks of the Dutch military police unit were also different from those of their US colleagues, who in addition to patrols with the Iraqi police often took the lead in investigations and arrests. To his regret, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman could only use his MPS for training, monitoring and supervising the local Iraqi police force.²⁰ In this purely supportive role, the much smaller Dutch MP unit was far from carrying out arrests or house searches, as he would have liked. Nevertheless, they regularly assisted the Iraqi police during operations. Thanks to this operational task, they were known as the 'green MPS'. The unit therefore had an entirely different task from the regular detachment of 'blue MPS' – comprising thirteen members – which conducted regular military police tasks inside the NLBG.

The total Dutch deployment in Al Muthanna ultimately comprised about 1,100 military personnel, from all parts of the armed forces. The battle group was built up around the First Marine Battalion and was headed

by a reinforced battalion staff. It comprised three Marine companies (11, 12 and 13 Infantry Company), a staff and combat service support company (10 Combat Service Support Company) and a combat support company (14 Support Company), which consisted of a reconnaissance platoon, an anti-tank platoon, a mortar platoon and an engineer reconnaissance platoon.²¹ The infantry and support companies formed the operational core of the NLBG.

The logistical effort during the initial build-up, executed mainly by a National Support Element (NSE) from Shaiba logistics base near Basra, amounted to “a logistical blitzkrieg” according to the Marines. About 522 prefabs for accommodation and office space and 700 containers containing material and equipment were delivered in a short space of time.²² In addition to the Marine battalion’s standard light-infantry equipment, such as small arms, anti-tank weapons, mortars and Land Rovers with mounted machine-guns, 1 NLBG also had armoured wheeled Patria vehicles. The Royal Netherlands Navy provided the battle group with a field hospital (Field Dressing Station) and additional intelligence-gathering capacity in the shape of two Field Liaison Teams. These FLTS comprised a total of sixteen personnel from the Special Intervention Unit of the Marine Corps, who were Special Forces troops who had been trained in counter-terrorism operations. The formal task of the FLTS was to gather human intelligence (HUMINT), but they were also to arrest suspects. Like the battalion’s reconnaissance platoon, the teams were directed by the intelligence officer, a US Marine Corps Captain who had been assigned to the battalion since 2002 as part of an exchange programme.

Apart from the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps, the Royal Netherlands Army provided a substantial contribution of 230 troops. The greater part was made up of an engineer construction company that built the new camps in As Samawah, Ar Rumaythah and Al Khidr, plus the accommodation for the helicopter detachment on Tallil Airbase (close to the town of Nasiriyah in the neighbouring province of Dhi Qar) and the one for the transit detachment and Contingent Command at the large allied army camp near Shaibah. Contingent Command was a small detachment which operated separately from 1 NLBG and acted as the ‘eyes and ears’ of the Netherlands Defence Staff. The army’s contribution also included a communications and information systems detachment and many logistics and technical specialists for the NSE. The Royal Netherlands Air Force supported the battle group with three heavy CH-47 Chinook transport helicopters for logistical support, troop transport, air reconnaissance and airmobile operations.

The Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna was unable to deploy its infantry capacity to the full during the first weeks for various reasons. Convoy protection absorbed a great deal of combat power, as did the need to deploy Marines in shifts for the construction of the new camps. On top of that, 12 Infantry Company arrived in Kuwait only on 4 August and still had to adapt before it could be fully operational.

And finally there was the searing heat. "When you arrive, sit still, drink lots of water and feel sorry for yourself," was the advice of the British. In spite of all the warnings and the acclimatisation week in Kuwait, the extreme climatic conditions came as a surprise, particularly for troops patrolling in full body armour. Al Muthanna proved to be a red-hot sandpit, where conditions were tough. The fact that even the Iraqis thought it an extreme summer was little consolation.²³

Outside the wire

The security situation in Al Muthanna was calm when compared with the rest of Iraq. There were only a few incidents of unknown assailants firing directly at patrols, convoys or watchtowers. Any other threat usually came from exchanges of fire between criminals or from arguments between neighbours and tribal disputes. Dutch Marines occasionally intervened, as happened during an exchange of fire on 4 August between two sub-clans of the large Albu Hassan tribe on either side of an irrigation channel near Ar Rumaythah. By driving Patria vehicles between the two conflicting parties as a kind of buffer, the QRF of 13 Infantry Company brought the fighting to an end. The parties did not shoot at the Dutch. The cause of the argument proved to be dissatisfaction with the functioning of the irrigation office's manager, who was accused of corruption. In a Coalition project to clean the irrigation channels initiated three months previously, the highly-prized jobs had been handed out unfairly and far fewer people had been employed than had been promised.²⁴

According to Major Jos Schooneman, commander of 13 Infantry Company in Ar Rumaythah, the intervention was a test in the eyes of the locals. Like his battle group commander, the Major stressed the importance of the perception of the Iraqi population, which in the view of both officers was the centre of gravity for their operation.²⁵ They believed that Iraqi citizens had to be convinced of the fact that the Dutch could bring security. A second test for 13 Infantry Company in Schooneman's opinion involved an operation at the chicken market a day later, where,

in addition to fowl, Kalashnikovs and other firearms were being traded. The infantry company conducted a raid together with the then still present US military police. Schooneman stressed the signal function: “we take no nonsense and we can strike anywhere we like”.²⁶ The result was somewhat disappointing, however: only five firearms and some ammunition were seized and one arrest was made.

A few days later, the first gunfight took place in As Samawah at night when the reconnaissance platoon stumbled upon some looters on the site of the destroyed cement factory. The complex had been a popular target for thieves for months due to the copper piping and other valuable materials to be found there. The next night, the commander of 11 Infantry Company, Major Kees Schellens, sent a patrol of seventeen Marines in four Land Rovers back to the location. The Marines entered the site on foot, followed by the vehicles. When a shot was fired at them from a distance of about seventy metres, they advanced in a line in the darkness. By the light of a flare, they saw several armed persons, who reportedly “were delivering effective fire”. No-one was hit. The Dutch returned fire on three occasions.²⁷ The intensity of this first firefight would not have impressed US forces engaged in ever more violent actions elsewhere in Iraq. However, for the Dutch military, it was the fiercest hostile exchange of small arms fire since UN operations in Cambodia and Bosnia in the first half of the 1990s.

While the Marines of 11 and 13 Infantry Companies grew accustomed to their roles by conducting intensive patrols and minor operations, there was dissatisfaction accumulating in 12 Infantry Company, as reported by its commander Major Mark van den Berg. In mid-August, in anticipation of the move to the new camp near Al Khidr, his unit was still operating from the old (American) Camp Smitty, where personnel spent most of their time undertaking guard duties.²⁸ The mood improved after the move on 22 August to the unit’s own new compound in Al Khidr, which had been named *Al Aser Al-jadid* (the new era). The infantry company now commanded its own sector. Another boost to morale came from the news that the Marines were to be the first in the battle group to be accommodated in prefabs, robust accommodation with air conditioning.²⁹

The express wish of the men of 12 Infantry Company to see more action was fulfilled at the end of that month. Major Van den Berg first focussed on the illegal distribution of water in his area of operations, a cause of much conflict around Al Khidr. To this end, the company conducted joint patrols with the Iraqi police along the main water pipeline. Their brief experience in Iraq had already taught them that working together with

local cops often meant an end to any secrecy surrounding an operation. The company therefore also conducted so-called "unannounced checks" – without the Iraqi police. Soon, the Dutch Marines caught four truck drivers red-handed, illegally tapping water from the pipeline. The suspects were detained on site, but in order not to overwhelm the still fragile legal system the Marines decided to send them home with a warning.³⁰

The NLBG's day-to-day operations were known as normal framework operations. These comprised patrols, intelligence gathering, securing convoys and static objects, and preserving law and order, sometimes in conjunction with the Iraqi authorities. An example of the regular battle rhythm was the work schedule of 13 Infantry Company in Ar Rumaythah. This unit rotated its three infantry platoons over three task fields every four days. One platoon, comprising three rifle sections of nine Marines and one staff section, was kept completely free for guard duties at Sun City, the company's new camp outside town. The second platoon could then concentrate fully on patrols in and around Ar Rumaythah. These Marines conducted both motorised and foot patrols and set up checkpoints to search vehicles for weapons, drugs and other trafficked goods.³¹ In addition to presence patrols and reconnaissance, they also conducted 'social' patrols aimed at making contact with the locals and, for instance, distributing questionnaires in order to gather information. Apart from intelligence on criminals or any hostile parties the Dutch inquired about problems the Iraqis faced and about their attitude to the Coalition. The third platoon was assigned to a combination of convoy protection, providing a rifle section as Quick Reaction Force and, especially in the early stage, providing a work section of extra hands in constructing the new compound.³² The infantry companies in As Samawah and Al Khidr worked more or less in the same way. All three were reinforced in their tasks by a section from the anti-tank platoon, while 11 Infantry Company was also permanently reinforced by personnel from the mortar platoon in an infantry role.³³

During the early weeks, public security tasks emerged as the main challenge for the infantrymen operating 'outside the wire'. The Marines frequently had to maintain order around petrol stations, where fights broke out in the long queues for the pumps. They sometimes arrested illegal fuel traders. The structural fuel shortage was mainly the result of poor distribution and activities by armed gangs, who supplied the market by operating illegal petrol stations in the desert close to points where they illegally tapped oil from the pipelines. This was harmful to the infrastructure, the local economy and public safety, and forced 1 NLBG to take ever more radical measures.

In order to improve supplies, Dutch military personnel accompanied fuel convoys from the refinery in Shaibah to the petrol pumps in Al Muthanna, initially every other day and later twice a week. This made heavy demands on manpower. 1 NLBG even deployed helicopters to accompany these convoys, because drivers regularly drove their tankers into the desert to sell them and their contents to criminal tribes. In September, these efforts improved petrol supplies temporarily, but distribution and the high price of propane remained a persistent problem.³⁴

Murder, theft and looting as well as trade in stolen goods such as water, fuel and copper wire remained the greatest security problem in the impoverished province. Carjackings were another scourge.³⁵ Criminals placed obstacles on roads to make cars and trucks stop, after which the occupants were forced out at gunpoint. The thieves often left victims blindfolded and handcuffed in the desert. Vehicle owners frequently ended up dead as a result of these assaults. The Dutch Marines responded to the different kinds of crime in a policing role, as was the case on 12 August after an attack on a security van carrying money for the children's hospital in As Samawah, during which 32,000 dollars was stolen. The QRF of 11 Infantry Company reacted, but when it arrived at the location, the four perpetrators, who had shot the vehicle's windows to pieces, had already escaped. They were thought to have been members of the infamous Al Zuwaid tribe, notorious for its criminal activities.³⁶

Almost all crimes involved firearms, of which there were plenty in Iraq. Former military personnel often still possessed their personal weapons and Iraqi army depots were looted after the fall of the Baath regime, which triggered a lively trade in firearms. Tribal militias and political parties were often the proud owners of heavier material, such as RPGs, machine guns and even mortars. According to British intelligence officers, some tribes in the south owned weapons arsenals which rivalled those of regular Coalition infantry units.³⁷ The CPA therefore gave military commanders the right to confiscate weapons which they saw as a threat to the security of their troops and the local population. Each household or business was permitted one weapon, as long as it was not taken off the premises. Only those who held firearms licences were permitted to carry a weapon in public.³⁸ The Dutch did not conduct large-scale searches for arms, but did act against those who openly carried weapons.

The Dutch government's initial aim of having its troops operate in the background in Iraq and of conducting patrols and checkpoints as little as possible was in contrast to the wishes of most Iraqis with whom the

Dutch Marines came into contact.³⁹ Right from the start, local politicians and administrators asked the Dutch troops to display a robust presence in the towns and villages in order to promote a sense of security. They also pressed for consistent action against the types of crime which the Iraqi police did not dare to fight, such as the widespread trafficking in fuel, water, arms and livestock (mainly sheep).⁴⁰ The high prices paid for these goods in Saudi Arabia meant that it was profitable to smuggle these over the poorly guarded border. The retail price of lamb in Al Muthanna had consequently doubled, which made it unaffordable for many people.

It was one example of many which showed how military security tasks were bound up with the local economy, public security, the barely-functioning government and problems relating to public facilities. The illegal sheep trade made criminal organisations wealthy and led to inflation and social unrest. But did this mean that Dutch forces had to assist the Iraqi police and the Iraqi Public Prosecutor in As Samawah in intercepting clandestine transports?⁴¹ Such operations did not match their assignment, since the Dutch government held the CPA formally responsible for tackling these kinds of administrative problems. For 1 NLBG in Al Muthanna, however, the express assignment of keeping tasks separate was not as simple as had been put down on paper in The Hague a few months before.

The proconsul of Al Muthanna

Only the bare bones of the civil occupying authority on which the Dutch government had pinned its hopes for separating military and civil-administrative tasks were present at the provincial level in Al Muthanna. CPA chief Paul Bremer had arrived in Baghdad in mid-May 2003 with a view to conducting a robust occupation policy, but had so far only translated this intention into big ambitions at the national level relating to the transformation of Iraq according to a liberal-democratic model. In the meantime, the CPA had a poor grip on the day-to-day administration of the country. In June, the service appointed four regional coordinators, including one in Basra for the southern provinces (including Al Muthanna).

CPA personnel were few and far between. The central administrative apparatus in Baghdad was largely run by junior diplomats and, in the case of the US, young political appointees of the governing Republican Party, who often arrived without relevant expertise or experience and who tended to depart after only a few months of service.⁴² They lived and

worked in the heavily-guarded Green Zone, an area of central Baghdad around one of Saddam Hussein's pompous palaces, and rarely left this isolated location due to the increasingly hazardous security situation. An often-heard comment in military circles was that the CPA lacked a realistic picture of the country. It became known amongst military personnel as *Can't Produce Anything*.⁴³

In the provinces, Bremer's apparatus, formally separate from the military line of command, was kept afloat mainly by detached military personnel and military logistical support. Throughout the spring and summer of 2003, Lieutenant Colonel O'Donahue was therefore acting as a proconsul on behalf of the CPA in Al Muthanna. He was both military commander and interim representative of the occupation administration and embodied both military and civil power. All over Iraq, US and British military commanders took on occupying tasks at the provincial level. The last time US forces had taken on governance on such a scale had been during and after the Second World War in Europe and Asia. A crucial difference between the occupation then and the occupation of Iraq now was that after World War II the role of military personnel had been foreseen, prepared for and deemed essential by political and military leaders.⁴⁴ In spite of all the far-reaching ambitions for the democratisation of Iraq, the 2003 occupation was almost entirely improvised.

In order to be able to conduct his task as civil-military commander in Al Muthanna, O'Donahue possessed the required institutional powers. He was authorised to appoint and dismiss government officials and always had the final say in local political decision-making. He took most decisions on his own initiative, although he usually pushed interim governor Sheikh Sami to the fore to put an Iraqi face on the administration. In July, O'Donahue set up a town council of twelve administrators for As Samawah in order to get the Iraqis more actively involved. They were selected for their professional expertise by an electorate of forty leading personages, known as a caucus. This procedure was not particularly democratic, but Major Matt Fellingner, the Civil Affairs officer in the US Marine battalion, did his utmost to make the caucus as representative as possible. Once the provincial capital's administrative council had been installed, the staff of 2/5 Marines in Al Muthanna went a step further than their colleagues in the other Iraqi provinces. They also drew up a Charter in order to create a system of checks and balances. This stipulated that the executive, technocratic town council would be supervised by an advisory council comprising forty seats, in which the main tribes and political parties were to be represented.⁴⁵

Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman praised his American predecessor for his dealings with the Iraqis, in particular the council members in As Samawah. His political adviser Rentenaar also generally praised the American achievements in administrative terms. However, the diplomat did believe that the US Marines had displayed their power too forcefully. Lieutenant Colonel O'Donahue obviously took decisions independently and did not seem to understand the art of making the Iraqis feel as if they themselves had come up with the solution.⁴⁶ The Dutch would do things differently, if only because they were forced to do so by the restrictions their national mandate placed upon them.

So to what extent were the Dutch prepared for the administrative chaos in Iraq? In May, the reconnaissance team had not failed to notice that the US-UK occupying force had taken on extensive responsibilities regarding administration and maintaining public order. According to the international Law of Occupation, these are responsibilities connected to the status of an occupying power. The team and political adviser Rentenaar both had suggested that the Netherlands should also take on the tasks of such an authority. The British divisional commander let it be known that he expected them to do so.⁴⁷ However, the Dutch government specifically did not want to operate and be viewed as an occupying power in Iraq. In The Hague, the news that O'Donahue appointed and dismissed government officials was received with dismay.⁴⁸ The consensus was that Dutch military personnel should distance themselves from such practices, due to the controversy surrounding the Iraq war prior to the operation. Moreover, in the Netherlands 'occupation' was widely associated with 'oppression' – hardly surprising in a country where the term is commonly equated with the experiences under German occupation during the Second World War. The Netherlands government translated this sentiment rather forcedly into a limited mandate that proved extremely difficult to work with.

In international law, the term occupation has a completely different, non-emotional and concretely descriptive meaning, however. According to the international Law of Occupation, as laid down in the Hague Conference Laws & Customs of War on Land of 1907 and the Fourth Treaty of Geneva of 1949, the status of occupying power mainly entails obligations towards the population in addition to specific entitlements. To the best of its ability, the occupier is obliged to ensure public order and security, medical care and food supplies and to safeguard public facilities. These extensive responsibilities in themselves were just as much a cause for concern in The Hague as the negative associations with the occupation status.⁴⁹

Recent experiences in peace support operations had demonstrated that the maintenance of public order by military personnel, including arrests and detention, was a legal and political minefield. The NATO operation in Kosovo in 1999, in which Dutch forces had been de facto occupiers and exercised military rule, had for this reason caused the then Minister for Defence many a headache.⁵⁰

In order to be able to contribute to the stabilisation phase in Iraq, without taking on the status of occupying power, the Dutch government pinned its hopes on UN Security Council Resolution 1483. Without a mandate under international law, Dutch military personnel could after all only be present in Iraq at the invitation of the occupying powers. The Netherlands would then also possess an occupying status.⁵¹ This was obviously not the intention and the Netherlands therefore worked hard to have the distinction between occupier and non-occupier stressed in the UN resolution. The resolution issued on 22 May 2003 nevertheless was a disappointment in this respect. The distinction between the occupying powers and their non-occupying Coalition partners, a new concept in international law, was referred to only in the preamble.⁵² Resolution 1483 also contained no explicit authorisation for a separate international force in addition to or as a replacement for the US-UK army of occupation. Only in the autumn, with the adoption of Resolution 1511 on 16 October 2003, when 1 NLBG had already been deployed for three months, was this lack of proper authority repaired.⁵³

Perhaps precisely because of the weak basis for the deployment, the Netherlands government emphasised the supposed difference between the US-UK occupying force and its own troops in Al Muthanna to the extreme. It did so more than the other participating countries, such as Italy, Poland, Spain and Denmark.⁵⁴ No other Coalition partner used the name Stabilisation Force Iraq as the Netherlands did, and although the Dutch Minister for Defence acted as if all non-occupying powers in Iraq served within an 'SFIR alliance', the abbreviation was used only in the Netherlands.⁵⁵ The word 'SFIR' could also only be seen on Dutch military vehicles from early 2004. The Danes and Italians, partners in the multinational division in the south, did not make such an effort to distinguish themselves. They saw themselves simply as belonging to the Coalition Forces and at the request of the British happily provided civil personnel for the CPA.⁵⁶

In spite of several warnings about both the irrelevance and impracticality of a strict demarcation of the role of the NLBG with respect

to administration and law enforcement, the Netherlands continued to press the United Kingdom to segregate the two domains. To this end, in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence drew up caveats.⁵⁷ The British were aware of Dutch sensitivities, but were hoping for a pragmatic attitude, similar to that of the Danish and Italians. They regretted the fact that the Netherlands did not wish to take on a number of CPA tasks temporarily.⁵⁸ Plagued by personnel shortages and eager to demonstrate the multinational character of the occupation, they continued to try to involve the Netherlands in governance, for instance by asking it to provide the CPA governor for Al Muthanna. This request was refused, as was a similar appeal for civil support personnel for the CPA in August.⁵⁹

Irritation about the Dutch stance came to light a month later during a visit to Iraq by Minister for Defence Henk Kamp. The Dutch Minister gave the British regional coordinator of the CPA in Basra, Sir Hilary Synnott, what Synnott himself described as a “schoolmasterly lecture about Dutch political attitudes” and requested the coordinator to tell the Iraqis that the Dutch would distance themselves from civil-administrative matters. The British diplomat responded to this rather brusquely:

“that I could personally assure the Minister that Iraqis ‘would not give a damn’ about Dutch sensitivities; they just wanted to see progress on the ground. But if the Minister wished us to publicise the limitations of Dutch engagement in assisting Iraq, we would of course be ready to oblige him. The minister switched to conciliatory mode and the instruction was dropped.”⁶⁰

The desired distinction between the Dutch stabilisation force and the occupying powers was formally laid down in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). Of the nine countries within the British-led multinational division which concluded this memorandum with the British Ministry of Defence, the Netherlands added by far the longest list of national limitations.⁶¹ The two main caveats were that the Netherlands would not undertake any civil-administrative tasks and would not participate in executive law enforcement. In a province of an occupied country rife with crime this seemed rather odd. For the credibility of the Dutch government in creating its own ‘special status’ in occupied Iraq, the proof would be in the eating.

Crime fighting

In the first weeks of August 2003 it became clear that the Dutch Marines could not escape having to enforce public order. After all, how did 1 NLBG expect to create “a secure and stable environment” without being allowed to fight crime in a province where crime was the main security problem? Pressure from local dignitaries and the Iraqi people rapidly demonstrated that the Dutch politicians’ desire to keep the military presence as much in the background as possible was impractical and unrealistic.⁶² Dutch credibility was consequently being tested. A rapid transfer of responsibilities to Iraqi security bodies was the obvious aim, but proved to be premature.

As in the rest of Iraq, the police force in Al Muthanna was extremely weak. Members were poorly trained, mostly corrupt and unreliable due to their loyalty to tribal and political groups. The Dutch military police had to conduct criminal investigations into activities of Iraqi policemen far more frequently than expected.⁶³ The technical skills of the police were also poor. They were not trained to collect evidence and had little knowledge of arrest techniques. A carefully prepared joint raid by Dutch MPs and Iraqi police failed completely because the policemen opened fire immediately on arrival. “We got out of the car and bullets started flying all around” Captain Dennis Klein, who led the MP platoon, said. According to a colleague, it was quite common among the Iraqis to fire first into the air “to let people know they are here” and only then to knock on doors.⁶⁴

The Dutch wish to leave executive police tasks to the Iraqis was further hampered by the strategy of division commander Lamb, who had made combating crime one of his priorities. In early September, on the orders of the commander of all the Coalition troops, US Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, Operation Longstreet was launched to destroy “destabilising elements” in those parts of Iraq where the Coalition had so far hardly made its presence felt. Major General Lamb’s chief concern was organised crime and he translated the assignment in the southern sector into tackling hostile *and* criminal groups. In Al Muthanna he mainly wanted to improve insight into illegal activities along the long border with Saudi Arabia. The Coalition’s information gathering was poor in this area, because divisional headquarters and the CPA initially allocated a much higher priority to guarding the border with Iran.⁶⁵ The vast, sparsely-populated desert area of Al Muthanna was crossed by smuggling routes which had also been well used under the Baath regime. The Coalition suspected that radical Islamic

fighters were mingling with the nomads who regularly crossed the border, although there was still little concrete evidence for this.

The NLBG contributed to Operation Longstreet by setting up mobile checkpoints to obtain an overview of these smuggling operations. Dutch troops stopped and searched vehicles.⁶⁶ Helicopters were used to drop off forces over distances of hundreds of kilometres on the desert roads. During the one week long operation the Dutch Marines caught only a few people trafficking goods. They found no evidence of terrorist infiltration. However, they did confiscate dozens of firearms. Despite some irritation over the security checks, they received a surprisingly positive response. In particular, Iraqi travellers found the road between As Salman and As Samawah (Route Milwaukee) to be safer.⁶⁷

A larger-scale crime fighting operation was Operation Sweeney, held from 6 to 26 October 2003. The assignment was to “disrupt the threats of smuggling and organised large-scale crime”. The focus of this MND South-East operation lay in the ‘British’ provinces of Basra and Maysan. Operation Sweeney was part of a broad campaign focused on restoring essential public services. The division also intended to provide assistance to the CPA in building administrative capacities and stimulating the local economy. Codenamed Big October, it was an ambitious plan, mainly intended by the headquarters in Basra to influence public opinion. The UK especially wanted the operation to provide a counterweight to the extremely negative picture of the occupation of Iraq being painted back home.⁶⁸

At the end of September, Major General Lamb announced that Operation Sweeney took absolute priority.⁶⁹ He asserted that crime posed a threat to the mission as a whole and had strategic consequences for the reconstruction of Iraq. He therefore ordered sub-units such as the Dutch battle group to counter large-scale organised crime by gathering information, arresting key criminal figures, identifying trafficking routes, intercepting vehicles and supporting police and border control activities. According to Lamb, the success of the operation would not be measured by the number of arrested criminals and the quantity of smuggled goods, but instead by the perception of it among locals.⁷⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman considered the visible presence of Coalition troops on the streets the key to influencing public perception. Organised crime, as Swijgman explained in his operation concept, had to be disrupted and deterred. The NLBG focused mainly on the arms and stolen cars trade, carjackings and police corruption.⁷¹ A major additional consideration for the Dutch battle group commander was the destabilising

conduct of political and religious parties, who tended to use armed militia to demand a role in preserving law and order. Although these actions were as yet limited, these groups were becoming increasingly vocal.

Within the framework of Operation Sweeney, Dutch Marines conducted joint patrols with the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC), a paramilitary organisation set up by the Americans to maintain law and order and ultimately to form the basis for a new Iraqi army. As part of the Big October campaign, MND South-East aimed to train and equip an ICDC battalion in each of the four southern provinces. For the time being Al Muthanna had to make do with a company. Locals responded very positively to the presence of the Dutch-trained Iraqi auxiliary troops.⁷²

In the opinion of Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman, Operation Sweeney did not result in much more. When it came to the actual reduction of crime, there were merely indications that criminal organisations had been temporarily disrupted in their activities and that 1 NLBG's intelligence section had gained better insight into their *modus operandi*. The Dutch were especially bewildered by the degree to which the Iraqi security services themselves proved to have been infiltrated and corrupted by criminals. Evidence gathered by the Dutch MP platoon showed that services such as the Iraqi police and the Coalition-financed Facility Protection Service (FPS) – an armed guard service for government buildings and essential public complexes – were not just turning a blind eye, but were in some cases also themselves actively involved in criminal activities.⁷³

The theft of vehicles and looting of cargo on the highways (including military Coalition convoys) created a great deal of unrest throughout the southern region, including Al Muthanna. In September and October, 1 NLBG devoted much attention to tracing and returning stolen vehicles.⁷⁴ The Marines occasionally caught criminals in the act and reacted robustly. On 12 October, for instance, a patrol saw a truck being hijacked and opened fire on the attackers' vehicle as there seemed to be acute danger for the occupants of the truck.⁷⁵ Dutch forces thus did not shirk executive police tasks. Such tasks were important to the credibility of the Dutch military in Iraq.

Targeting operations

In order to increase its operational effectiveness, the NLBG conducted targeting operations in addition to normal framework operations. It did so both on its own initiative and on orders from MND South-East.

Targeting operations were aimed at arresting suspects or meeting specific intelligence requirements. Information-gathering was done for instance by setting up observation posts. Reconnaissance teams used this method to observe the office of a political party and the firearms trade in the centre of As Samawah. Operations to apprehend suspects targeted organised crime on the one hand, such as the aforementioned raids on members of the criminal Al Zuwaid tribe and attempts to arrest the looters at the cement factory. On the other, 1 NLBG concentrated on apprehending officials of the former Baath regime or insurgents who might pose a threat to the Coalition.⁷⁶

Operation Pocket Search was the first major operation in the second category. During this operation, on 10 September, the Dutch battle group attempted to round up number 62 on the blacklist of suspects sought by the Coalition. Intelligence had shown that General Abdul Wahid Shinan Ribat, the former Chief of Staff of the Iraqi army, regularly stayed with family in and around As Samawah. However, the information obtained from local sources by the intelligence section on this High-Value Target (HVT) was rather vague. As a result, a simultaneous raid on four possible locations was required. The operation also aimed to contribute to the positive image of 1 NLBG among local Iraqis. Al Muthanna's overwhelmingly Shiite population, which had suffered so severely under the Baath regime, increasingly complained about the lack of robust action by the Coalition. Officials from the former regime were apparently still walking around freely, even though citizens regularly provided information on the whereabouts of such people. 1 NLBG prepared Operation Pocket Search in the utmost secrecy, but decided to publicise it widely afterwards. The intended message was that the Dutch "were actively looking for" senior officials from the former dictatorship.⁷⁷

In order to guarantee an element of surprise, the Dutch Marines did not inform the Iraqi police of the imminent operation and only commenced their training the evening before. During the intelligence briefing that evening, the intelligence chief estimated that a few armed guards posed no great threat and closed with the words: "Be professional, not trigger-happy".⁷⁸ The Marines acted at dawn. Task groups raided the four targets simultaneously. They were accompanied by interpreters, and also by female military personnel to search rooms containing women and children. At Camp Smitty, a QRF and a Chinook helicopter with its rotors turning were ready to provide assistance. The targets were the homes of the general's son and brother in the city and two residential complexes

in the countryside. The operation went according to plan, but the Dutch failed to find the former Iraqi Chief of Staff at any of the locations.⁷⁹

According to commander Swijgman, the attempt to arrest the Iraqi former General made an impression on the residents of Al Muthanna thanks to the scale and manner of the operation.⁸⁰ The operation's specific message – the Dutch are actively seeking important Baath officials – was contrary to the national mandate, however. This stated that Dutch military personnel would not deliberately seek war criminals and former regime officials.⁸¹ But there was some flexibility in interpretation. The NLBG was permitted to “act against occasional targets on the basis of intelligence” and also had ample powers to undertake action against people who posed a threat to the Coalition.⁸² The latter provision in particular implied that Operation Pocket Search ostensibly fell within the mandate, as did other NLBG operations to apprehend suspects. “The search for HVTS” continued in Al Muthanna, the intelligence section reported enthusiastically to British divisional headquarters.⁸³

Detention and interrogation

Yet what if an attempt to apprehend a suspect succeeded?⁸⁴ At the time of Operation Pocket Search, most rules and procedures on dealing with detainees had not yet been drawn up. Thanks to its status as a non-occupying power, the Netherlands was in principle not authorised to apprehend and hold in custody residents of occupied Iraq.⁸⁵ The Dutch government hoped to avoid this responsibility by keeping crimefighting and the search for war criminals out of the NLBG's tasks by means of caveats.⁸⁶ Moreover, Dutch military personnel were not permitted to interrogate anyone. Yet during the first year of the operation in Al Muthanna they apprehended more people than during any previous crisis response operation since 1989. Furthermore, the Dutch did subject suspects to questioning. In a legal sense, there proved to be flexibility between terms such as ‘apprehend’ and ‘arrest’, ‘detain’ and ‘intern’, ‘interview’ and ‘interrogation’. Even for the legal advisers in the Dutch contingent and at the Defence (Staff) Crisis Management Centre (DCBC) in The Hague, there was initially no clarity on this – as with the other national caveats.

The distinction between internees and detainees caused particular confusion. On the basis of the Law of Occupation as laid down in the Fourth Geneva Convention, the British in Southern Iraq were entitled to apprehend and intern citizens for crimes and other security reasons. The

Rules of Engagement (ROE) applied by MND South-East also stipulated that units in the UK-led division – i.e. including Dutch military forces – could arrest people, but in the case of the NLBG these always had to be termed ‘detainees’. The Memorandum of Understanding between the Netherlands and the UK stated that Dutch military personnel were permitted to detain but not to intern people.⁸⁷ On 27 July, the commander of 1 NLBG had translated these stipulations into a fragmented order, in which he sketched the general framework for apprehending suspects in both planned and reactive operations. According to this order, “questioning” by the battle group’s intelligence section or anyone else appointed by the commander was possible.⁸⁸

Swijgman’s legal adviser, Major Misha Geeratz, claimed that if suspects had “actually been in our power”, they then were ‘Dutch’ detainees.⁸⁹ For the process following apprehension, the distinction between those suspected of ‘ordinary’ crimes and those who posed a threat to the Coalition was crucial. Those suspected of crimes – often caught in the act and brought in by regular infantry patrols – were classed as criminal detainees and handed over almost immediately to the Iraqi police. Those people brought in because they posed a threat to the Coalition had to be handed over to the British. These were classed as security detainees and became internees from the moment they were handed over.⁹⁰

MND South-East incarcerated Iraqis in the Theatre Internment Facility (TIF) in Umm Qasr.⁹¹ The transfer had to take place as soon as possible, but certainly within four days. Due to the distance between Al Muthanna and Umm Qasr and for security reasons, transport was mostly carried out by helicopter. The first time this happened was on 6 September 2003 with a former Captain from the Iraqi army who had been arrested the day before in As Samawah for distributing pamphlets calling for violent action to be taken against foreign troops.⁹²

On the basis of international law, the British could detain people without any form of trial. A Detention Review Committee reviewed each case on the suspect’s arrival, and subsequently conducted regular repeat reviews, in order to advise the divisional commander on either extension or release. The Geneva Convention expressly prohibits the use of physical or mental force in obtaining intelligence. The Americans’ tarnished reputation with respect to human rights in the Global War on Terror (mainly due to their controversial treatment of so-called ‘unlawful combatants’ in Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and Bagram in Afghanistan) had contributed to the provision that former ‘Dutch’ detainees were not to be handed over to

the US after they had been surrendered to the UK – unless the Netherlands gave the UK explicit permission to do so.⁹³ However, it was still unclear who was supposed to give this kind of permission on behalf of the Netherlands during Operation Pocket Search.⁹⁴ It had been established that, if former General Ribat were to be arrested, the British would hand him over to the United States. In order not to delay the operation, Swijgman decided to accept this.⁹⁵

Red Cross employees had unrestricted access to the internees in the American and British prisons in Iraq and identified problems early on. For instance, there was an incident concerning the violent apprehension of nine people in Basra and their mistreatment in temporary custody on 15 September 2003, in which one person died. The suspect probably suffocated in the hood placed over his head by British forces. The practice of ‘hooding’ was frequently used to disorientate detainees, as well as to prevent recognition of military personnel, interrogators and interpreters. According to the Red Cross, US military personnel sometimes used hooding to exert physical pressure by making it difficult for the detainee to breathe.⁹⁶

Shortly after the Basra incident, divisional commander Lamb tightened the rules.⁹⁷ He expressly reiterated the existing regulations for humane treatment (no torture, physical punishment or humiliation) and prohibited the use of hoods and bags on heads. As almost all examples of maltreatment by British military personnel occurred during the apprehension, transport or temporary internment phase by sub-units, Lamb also accelerated transfers to the division’s internment facility. Separation of detainees and internees now had to be completed within eight hours, so that from 30 September on the handover to Iraqi police or to the British internment authorities could take place within twelve and fourteen hours respectively.⁹⁸

The new guidelines clarified procedures, but for Dutch military personnel a grey area remained in the hours between apprehension and handover to the British.⁹⁹ During this period, detainees were held in three cells in an auxiliary building at the CPA complex in As Samawah, where the battle group’s Field Liaison Teams were also housed. Here, among other things, it was determined whether a suspect could be released or handed over – and to whom. Questioning and interrogation were prohibited, but Dutch military personnel held ‘interviews’ with the detainees for the benefit of the selection procedure. Detainees had to be treated as prisoners of war in the sense of the Third Geneva Convention. Lieutenant Colonel

Swijgman requested his military intelligence service Counter Intelligence and Security (CIV) team to conduct these interviews, as its personnel – although not trained in tactical questioning – were at least qualified to screen people. However, Swijgman insisted that his legal adviser Geeratz be present during the questioning, in the same way as the 'Legad' sat in on interviews conducted with detained Iraqis by the FLT.¹⁰⁰

The CIV team comprised a Lieutenant Colonel and two NCOS and its task was to gather intelligence on potential threats to the Dutch detachment. Military intelligence (MIVD) personnel screened Iraqi employees who worked on the bases as well as locally recruited interpreters. They also independently sought information sources, but this proved tricky. The team therefore enthusiastically took the opportunity to talk to all detainees. The interviews were not allowed to delay the handover to the British and intelligence personnel were eager to obtain the maximum amount of information within the limited time available. The interviews therefore had all the hallmarks of interrogations.¹⁰¹ The CIV team was not encouraged to do it this way. The British Joint Forward Interrogation Team in Umm Qasr in fact indicated that it preferred to have detainees delivered 'raw'. The main motive for MIVD personnel to question the prisoners anyway was to improve their own poor intelligence position.

The MIVD detachment was expressly not under the command of the battle group, but took its orders directly from The Hague. Arguing that they wanted to keep their interview methods secret, the MIVD personnel objected to the presence of Major Geeratz as a legal supervisor. The Defence Staff accepted the argument that the military intelligence service had to be able to guarantee confidentiality, and in early September confirmed that the CIV team was authorised to determine who could be present at the interviews. A "ten-point list" of instructions on the process for the detention and handover of suspects sent by The Hague on 1 October confirmed this directive. Nevertheless, the commander of 1 NLBG was emphatically given final responsibility in this process. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman subsequently sent a letter of protest, in which he refused to take responsibility for detainees questioned without his legal adviser being present.¹⁰²

The CIV team commander was responsible for the interviews, but he only worked at Camp Smitty and was never actually present in the As Samawah compound. The result was that the two NCOS in his team conducted the interviews on their own and unsupervised, although they were not trained to do so.¹⁰³ The Dutch Ministry of Defence's focus on detention and questioning in Iraq increased as the autumn continued. On

15 October, the Defence Staff asked for a list of persons who had so far been handed over to the British division on suspicion of activities against the Coalition. The list contained ten names, eight of whom had been interviewed by the CIV team. Several had initially been arrested by the Iraqi police. The charges varied from suspected interest in Coalition troops to suspicion of planning attacks.¹⁰⁴

Exactly a week later, on 22 October, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman received a disturbing report via the highest Dutch representative at divisional headquarters, Lieutenant Colonel Ruud Hardenbol. Following his handover to the British, a Saudi national of Iraqi origin had complained about his treatment by the Dutch. The man had been arrested by Iraqi police on Saturday 4 October and subsequently given to the Dutch FLT. The CIV team had spent that evening and night questioning him. They suspected him of preparing an attack in As Samawah and setting up a local Al Qaeda network. He claimed to have had water thrown over him during three interviews and to have been subjected to sleep deprivation by so-called white noise from a radio. He also claimed to have had a hood placed over his head.¹⁰⁵

Swijgman asked the FLT and CIV team for an explanation. He also consulted Major Geeratz, who had received similar information from a fellow legal expert at MND South-East that same evening.¹⁰⁶ Following consultation with his NCOS, the head of the CIV team admitted that his personnel had used water to keep the detainee awake during the interviews but denied using a hood. They had used blackened dust goggles. The FLT commander admitted to Swijgman that the FLT did indeed use white noise in the corridors of the cell complex to prevent eavesdropping on interviews and communications between prisoners.¹⁰⁷

The Saudi national made two further serious allegations, but these were initially not included in the reports.¹⁰⁸ The man said that the Dutch had beaten him and attached electrodes to his body. Captain Anna Mobbs, commander of the Joint Forward Interrogation Team in Umm Qasr, did not really believe the latter. Yet she asked about it when the CIV team, an interpreter and a FLT member came to Umm Qasr at her request on Monday 20 October to explain in more detail the interview methods used in As Samawah. The Dutch declared that white noise was indeed used in the cell complex to render communication between detainees impossible and admitted using cold water to keep detainees awake during the occasionally very lengthy nocturnal interviews. They stated that the allegations about the use of hoods and physical violence were false. They further claimed

that the story about the electrodes had been made up. The British tactical questioners accepted this explanation, but did wonder whether the MIVD personnel knew what they were doing. In the opinion of Captain Mobbs, their level of expertise was "pretty low".¹⁰⁹

In the meantime, battle group commander Swijgman received more information from Basra which appeared to contradict earlier statements made by the CIV team. Partly on the insistence of his legal adviser, he was inclined to report the incident to the military police. Yet because he had little faith in the capability of the MPS in Iraq and feared that the incident would be leaked to the media, on 25 October he decided first to call Air Commodore Pieter Cobelens, who headed the Defence (Staff) Crisis Management Centre in his capacity as Director of Operations. Swijgman informed Cobelens of the allegations and his dilemma.¹¹⁰ After completing his report by phone, the battle group commander wrote a memo on the alleged misconduct. Consultations were subsequently held in The Hague between the Defence Staff, the MIVD and the Directorate of Legal Affairs, during which Cobelens' advice due to a possible outcry in the media was to "sweep it under the carpet and have the MIVD take measures." However, the Deputy Director of Legal Affairs wanted "to remove all doubts about [a] cover-up", and together with his superior pressed for the incident to be officially reported. Once Minister Kamp had been informed by Chief of Defence Staff Kroon, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman was therefore ordered to report the incident on 4 November. The military police initiated an investigation.¹¹¹

The British released the Saudi Arabian national on 18 November 2003. There was no evidence of membership of Al Qaida or of any plans for attacks against Coalition targets.¹¹² The MPS completed their investigation two days later. The Public Prosecutor's recommendation was that no criminal prosecution be pursued. However, the military police did lament the fact that the legal adviser had been prevented from attending interviews and that "some form of force" had been used during a number of interviews which could have been perceived as threatening by detainees. The investigation concluded that water had been thrown only at times when detainees threatened to fall asleep, hoods had never been used and white noise was only used against eavesdropping and communication between detainees.¹¹³

It therefore seemed as if the case was closed, until it came to light three years later. On 17 November 2006, Dutch daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* reported in large letters on its front page: "Dutch tortured

Iraqis". Six months later, an inquiry set up by the government in response to this allegation concluded that there had been no tormenting, torture or humiliating treatment in contravention of Dutch or international law. The inquiry report did, however, have one criticism: "In a single case, during the questioning of a Saudi detainee, the lines were crossed. His treatment, when viewed as a whole, could be classed as humiliating." In a general sense, the inquiry concluded that the MIVD had interpreted its authority too broadly. In the opinion of the inquiry commission, the responsibility for this lay with an inadequate political mandate.

The limits of the mandate

Meanwhile, the initiatives for maintaining public order in Al Muthanna no longer went unnoticed at the Ministry of Defence in The Hague. At the end of August, following reports of operations against criminals, the Contingent Command's legal adviser had to reassure the Defence Ministry's lawyers that the Dutch caveats were not being breached.¹¹⁴ Contingent commander Colonel Fred Hoogeland had thus far defended 1 NLBG's *modus operandi* as justified for maintaining a "safe and secure environment", as laid down in the assignment. "We are, however, very well aware that we may be operating at the edge of the mandate," he stated. Although there was a risk of "mission creep" – the gradual expansion of tasks beyond the limits of what was permitted – he assured the Ministry that was not yet the case.¹¹⁵ The Ministry's Directorate of Legal Affairs had its doubts and issued a general warning.¹¹⁶

October's Operation Sweeney created a new situation. Even before the campaign had begun, the Defence Staff wondered whether intended activities such as identifying trafficking routes and apprehending suspects and vehicles were within the Dutch mandate. The Chief of Defence Staff, who in his operational instructions had determined – in line with the political guidelines – that the NLBG would not conduct executive police tasks on its own initiative, began to feel uncomfortable.¹¹⁷ In response, the Contingent Command argued that Operation Sweeney came within the mandate as the operation was aimed at contributing to the general objective of a safe and secure environment.¹¹⁸ Legal experts in The Hague, however, let it be known that they viewed things differently. In their opinion, Operation Sweeney was indeed a form of crime fighting. Such support for the Iraqi police was possible within the limits of the national mandate only if it could be demonstrated that the initiative lay with the

Iraqi authorities. Without the Iraqi police in the front lines, the legal branch argued, planned operations to fight crime could be undertaken at the initiative of the Dutch only if the criminal activity in question posed a threat to Coalition troops.¹¹⁹

By making this connection to force protection, the lawyers effectively created the justification for operations such as Sweeney. After all, criminals who possessed Kalashnikov rifles and other firearms could easily be classed as a threat to Dutch troops. However, the Ministry of Defence's legal advice to justify operations was issued two weeks *after* Sweeney started. Preparations had already been underway for some time. 1 NLBG called it Operation Greenfield, and the aim was to tackle the main source of firearms in the province: the illegal arms trade at the sheep market in As Samawah.¹²⁰ Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman agreed to set up an inconspicuous observation post in an abandoned hotel close to the market in order to collect sufficient evidence. His main motive was the request from many Iraqis to do something about this trade. In the Dutch commander's view, the operation was clearly not about the security of his own troops, but that of the Iraqi people.¹²¹

On the basis of a reasonable amount of photographic and video evidence, Swijgman decided to initiate Operation Greenfield on 21 October. The objective was to detain thirty identified traders and their henchmen and to confiscate their goods. Major Schellens of 11 Infantry Company led the operation and had fifteen 'green' MPs under his command in support. The Dutch military policemen were to supervise the reception and transport of any suspects arrested by the Iraqi police to the local police stations, where they would monitor the investigations and interrogations. The role of the Iraqi police was restricted because a number of police officers were themselves regularly sighted at the arms market. 1 NLBG informed the local police officers of the operation just prior to its commencement and immediately picked them up from the police stations so there was no time to blow the operation's cover.

Previous attempts to approach the arms markets in Ar Rumaythah and As Samawah during patrols or in operations had taught 1 NLBG that the traders used a network of children to alert them. In order to sidestep this system and retain the full element of surprise, the Dutch Marines ordered taxis in Al Khidr. 11 Infantry Company used these to approach the market unnoticed from three sides. As additional civilian camouflage, the Marines wore Arab *shamags* on their heads while in the taxis. When they got out of the vehicles and threw off the headscarves, the surprise was complete.

Traders and customers tried to flee in vain. A few blows hit home as the crowd was forced back. The Marines fired a single warning shot when armed suspects ran away. Those fleeing dropped their weapons but still managed to escape.¹²²

Once the market site had been sealed off, about three hundred people were trapped. Search and arrest teams set to work, watched by a large audience drawn to the spectacle. The Iraqi police kept the crowd at a distance. A search of market customers led to 85 arrests being made using photographs.¹²³ Among those arrested were two police officers video footage of whom later proved their involvement in arms trading. All in all, the Dutch Marines thought the operation had been a success, even though the number of confiscated weapons was far lower than expected. Twenty-five firearms, including one Dragunov sniper rifle, eight hand grenades, a large quantity of ammunition, firearms components and knives were found.¹²⁴

Some of the MPS later criticised the “cowboy-style” operation. Furthermore, a number of them thought that the unexpectedly large number of suspects had led to detainees being treated sloppily and poorly.¹²⁵ They did not, however, note any irregularities. The Marines were proud of the operation. The fact that the limits of the political mandate had been stretched did not diminish that.

Separation of powers?

By now it was clear that the caveat on executive police tasks often proved untenable in practice. The other main caveat, which stipulated that the Dutch in Al Muthanna would take on no administrative tasks, was also subject to a tough practical test. Immediately after arrival, the Dutch Marines attempted to convey the message that the ‘civil domain’ and the ‘military domain’ were to be separated following the departure of the Americans. Political adviser Rentenaar described this objective as follows:

“On the one hand, there is the Dutch battalion which is contributing to security in Al Muthanna within the framework of the stabilisation force. On the other, there is the CPA and for the time being this [authority] is responsible for everything else. Anyone with questions, complaints or tips on villains, rogues and/or other subversives can turn to the Dutch troops. However, if the questions, complaints or tips concern the inadequate utilities, financial arrears, the reorganisation of the corrupt and incompetent government apparatus, the form and

content of the new public administration etc., then the first point of contact is the CPA.”

The Dutch repeated the message that the NLBG bore responsibility for security only and the CPA for everything else several times a day on local television, in the local paper and in individual conversations. They stressed the role of British Colonel Maurice Bulmer in his capacity as temporary CPA administrator. With a view to emphasising the civilian nature of the CPA, the Briton was not introduced as a Colonel, but as Mister Bulmer. The Royal Engineer had exchanged his uniform for chinos and a shirt after a quick visit to the American PX store in Kuwait. In the meantime, Rentenaar noted a sense of resignation among Iraqi administrators for someone they considered to be yet another new and probably temporary face. Rentenaar hoped that this would change when Paul Bremer's definitive representative arrived in As Samawah.¹²⁶ US diplomat Dick Andrews would take up his post in early September.

The apparently straightforward separation of civil administrative and military tasks on which the Dutch placed so much emphasis proved not to exist in practice however in Al Muthanna province. This clearly showed from the organisational model, which was presented as a pie chart cut into four slices. In the middle of the pie was CPA representative Bulmer (later Andrews). Formally this official, the CPA Governorate Coordinator, played the central role of shadow governor.¹²⁷ The first slice of the administrative apparatus pie under his command was the representative's Governorate Team (GT), at this point still a modest staff of two British officers who, like their boss, had changed into civilian clothing and occupied themselves with the most crucial administrative issues, such as paying the salaries of civil servants. The GT was of course far too small. In a study in July 2003, a team of US specialists in post-conflict reconstruction informed the CPA that twenty to thirty officials were required *per province* in order to conduct local administration properly.¹²⁸ This recommended number was not achieved anywhere. The three-strong CPA team in Al Muthanna was far below requirements even for this sparsely populated and remote province. The void could only partly be filled by the other three 'slices of pie'.

The second component of the administrative diagram was the team of the Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council (IRDC). Its three members were Iraqis who had fled Iraq following the uprising in 1991 and had since resided in the US and Canada. They had returned from exile and been contracted by the US Department of Defense. Having no formal job description, they were the eyes and ears of the Governorate Coordinator

and CPA in Al Muthanna. Without the IRDC, British shadow governor Bulmer would have been virtually blind and deaf to the needs of the local population. Yet in spite of their appointment and generous salaries paid by the Pentagon, the trio did not view the local CPA chief as their boss.¹²⁹

This also applied to the international consultants of the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), the third 'slice of pie'. RTI had been contracted by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to tackle setting up administration in the provinces.¹³⁰ As the executive development arm of the US State Department, USAID played a major role in Iraq, but because the CPA was accountable to the Defense Department rather than the State Department, the relationship between the Governorate Coordinator and the RTI was unclear. The RTI consultants stressed their semi-independent status by moving into their own location in As Samawah on the other side of the Euphrates river at the end of 2003, away from the CPA compound. "In short" the Dutch political adviser Rentenaar wrote, "we have been confronted with a minor 'pie revolt'. Slices of the 'pie' do not accept the authority of the 'pie boss' and the pie consequently appears to be crumbling."¹³¹

Bulmer and his successor Andrews were thus fortunate that the personnel in the final 'slice of pie' at least adopted a more helpful attitude. This 'administrative branch' of the CPA was formed by the Dutch battle group's CIMIC team, which took over many tasks from the US military Government Support Team (GST) of 2/5 Marines. CIMIC meant 'civil-military cooperation', a function which is explained within the NATO alliance as cooperation between military personnel, the civilian population, administrative authorities and international governmental and non-governmental organisations, all in support of the military mission. During previous overseas operations by the Dutch armed forces, CIMIC personnel confined themselves almost exclusively to liaison tasks and conducting small-scale aid projects. The main objective was to win the local people's support for the military presence, or at least make them view it in a favourable light.

CIMIC practices in Iraq were completely different, however. "During our acclimatisation period in Kuwait, it quickly became clear that we were going to have to do more than just CIMIC" one of the section members reported. The reason was that there was need for a team which could support the CPA. "From that time on, we have been no longer known as CIMIC, but as a Government Support Team" – like the US team before.¹³² The CPA did not formally run the Dutch CIMIC team as a full GST, but commanding officer Swijgman did not restrict his people in any way. A broad interpretation of

tasks proved unavoidable when the American GST departed on 15 August, earlier than agreed upon, to support the understaffed Polish division in tumultuous Central Iraq.¹³³ The NLBG commander thus again came up against the limits of his mandate, but was covered in a formal sense when the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs decided to permit Dutch 'military advisers' to work with the CPA.¹³⁴ Still, official CIMIC policy imposed restrictions. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence formally barred administrative activities, as well as structural reconstruction of infrastructure and public services.¹³⁵

The Dutch CIMIC team cooperated smoothly with CPA administrator Bulmer, especially after the arrival of Major Stefan Nommensen as the new leader of the Dutch GST in mid-August. The team initially comprised only eight members and could do little more than put out fires. It was therefore enlarged by four forward air controllers, who obviously did not have a full-time job in guiding laser-guided missiles onto enemy targets in Al Muthanna and were therefore assigned CIMIC as an additional task.¹³⁶ The legal adviser also supported the team. Along with Major Nommensen, another four officers arrived from the Netherlands to provide temporary manpower. The Dutch GST, now comprising eighteen members, was based in the CPA building in As Samawah, where the political adviser, the FLT and a Marine infantry platoon tasked with security were also stationed. Nommensen consulted with the CPA representative on a daily basis and accepted that his GST was there mainly to support the CPA.¹³⁷

In addition, the NLBG commander and his political adviser also played crucial roles in local government that were not identified in the administrative 'pie chart'. The amount of time Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman spent on political and administrative problems in his area of operations was considerable. He concentrated on topics which related to the security situation, and wherever possible left governance-building and reforms to others. He visited the many sheikhs in the province very regularly in order, among other things, to take stock of their wishes concerning future governmental and political relations.¹³⁸ Where he deemed it necessary, he also encouraged the CPA to appoint officials in the government and legal system.¹³⁹

All in all, in spite of the Dutch caveats, the provincial CPA coordinator in Al Muthanna could not complain about the support provided by the NLBG. He was in fact confronted by a military commander with very firm ideas. These did not necessarily match his own, as noted in particular by American CPA Governorate Coordinator Dick Andrews. One major bone of contention between the two authorities was the differing importance they

attached to relations with the local sheikhs and the role of tribal leaders. The sheikhs were the traditional elite. In conservative Al Muthanna, their tribes continued to play a major role. Andrews ignored them, however, as they were not compatible with his idea of a modern Iraq. In mid-September, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman, who held a different view, visited the leaders of the eighteen largest tribes in order to make their acquaintance and to explain the objective of the Dutch presence.¹⁴⁰ By mapping the various tribes, their interests and wishes, he hoped to fill part of the intelligence gap he had identified in this area.¹⁴¹

Political and administrative matters also demanded a great deal of the attention of Swijgman's company commanders, who, occasionally with political adviser Rentenaar at their side, had to steer a course, like diplomats, between the local sheikhs, political parties, clerics and other Iraqi officials. According to Swijgman, his subcommanders were occasionally not afraid to play at "power politics".¹⁴² While he himself deliberately left visits to council meetings at his level to Rentenaar, the company commanders could often be found at similar gatherings in their sectors. In an area of responsibility where security tasks were closely bound up with political and social problems, these meetings were a critical source of information.

De facto occupation

The Dutch worked according to the operational concept of the UK-led division, known as the Master Plan. The British distinguished between four lines of operation: security, essential services, economy and administration, aimed at reaching the ultimate objective of "a free, stable and democratic Iraq, which is capable of defending itself, but which no longer poses a threat to international security".¹⁴³ Seemingly, this British plan and the Dutch political mandate were incompatible. If the Dutch battle group under British command had interpreted its national assignment strictly, it would have taken responsibility only for the security line of operation, without having to engage in crimefighting and administration. Moreover, its CIMIC team would only have conducted small-scale hearts-and-minds projects with a view to improving the battle group's own security.

In reality, an entirely different situation arose after 1 August 2003. In addition to its responsibility for security, 1 NLBG in Al Muthanna assumed the role of the main executor of the lines of operation for essential services and economic reconstruction.¹⁴⁴ Almost all the province's small and medium-

sized projects in these fields were identified, assessed and implemented by Dutch CIMIC personnel and largely paid for by funds which the NLBG had at his disposal. These development funds from the Coalition Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP) had been made available by the CPA several months earlier as an emergency measure. The Dutch Government Support Team was therefore able to spend many hundreds of thousands of dollars each month on projects, and in doing so equalled the generosity of its US predecessor. In fact, according to Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman, the Iraqis would have been severely disappointed in the Dutch if they had only spent their own budget of 50,000 euros for Quick Impact Projects.

In the autumn of 2003, millions of dollars extra became available via CPA channels. And those with money to spend wielded power. Circumstances dictated that – for the time being – this meant mainly the Dutch battle group. Other players in Al Muthanna, such as local parties and town councils, had no or few financial resources themselves. The CPA provincial coordinator had access to considerable funds from Baghdad, but could do little with them due to complicated financial procedures and understaffing. Responsibility for development and reconstruction in Al Muthanna therefore rested squarely on the shoulders of the NLBG. The almost total lack of international governmental and non-governmental organisations (IGOs and NGOs) also gave the Dutch a monopoly in this respect. In Al Muthanna, there was only one NGO active in this period.¹⁴⁴

Of the four lines of operation in the British Master Plan, the CPA was left with civil administration. And there, too, the Dutch were heavily involved. The military influence on governmental issues was mostly indirect, but the Dutch share was significant as a result of the prominent role played by political adviser Michel Rentenaar. According to his official job description, the diplomat was only to provide political advice to commander Swijgman and report back to The Hague. In practice, 90 per cent of his time was taken up with forming a new Iraqi local government: setting up town and provincial councils, electing and determining the role of the governor and involving in this process the political parties, tribes, religious leaders and other interested parties. In addition to being political adviser to the Dutch battle group, Rentenaar was also unofficial adviser to the CPA Governorate Coordinator.¹⁴⁵ In fact, he shared an office in the CPA building in As Samawah with first Bulmer, and later Andrews, with a sign on the door which read "Coalition Provisional Authority – Al Muthanna".¹⁴⁶

In practice, the Dutch political adviser was fully integrated into the occupational authority and wielded great influence on the policies pursued

by the local CPA. As he also built up excellent working relations with the Dutch Marines, the military and civil-administrative efforts in Al Muthanna were closely integrated. The highest CPA representatives stayed too short a time in the province to be able to make their mark on developments and therefore relied heavily on Rentenaar. Bulmer spent only one month as shadow governor and Andrews would last only three months because, in the end, the American diplomat made himself impossible to deal with and was ultimately replaced.

In the eyes of the Al Muthanna people, powerbrokers and administrators, the Dutch duo of Swijgman-Rentenaar – “the Commander and Mr Michel” – therefore was in charge of the province, just as Lieutenant Colonel O’Donahue had been in the period prior to their arrival. The fact that the Iraqis saw Swijgman, just like his US predecessor, as the true holder of power was made clear when, to his discomfort, he saw Iraqi boys on the street carrying his portrait. These were photos they had cut out of the flyers distributed to locals by Dutch military personnel at the time of the change of command. In a society in which it was common to display and use portraits of the head of state or of those in positions of power, Swijgman’s picture was apparently cherished.¹⁴⁷ It was an innocent illustration of the fact that the situation in Al Muthanna in the summer and autumn of 2003 was similar to military rule. This changed only when a new CPA representative took up office about the time of the change of command from 1 NLBG to 2 NLBG. The election of a new Iraqi governor in October would also lessen the Dutch administrative role. However, with Sheikh Sami still in office and no local democratic tradition whatsoever, for the time being this would prove a challenging process.

3

Governing in the midst of chaos

Uprising in Al Khidr

During their first patrols in Al Khidr in August 2003 the Dutch Marines noticed that trouble was brewing in Al Muthanna's third largest town. Local tribes fought over access to drinking water, the police force was very weak and there was a great deal of violence on the streets. Of all the problems, the totally corrupt local government was the biggest source of unrest. As early as on 3 August, a 1 NLBG patrol came across a large demonstration in front of the town council's building, where a number of Al Khidr residents were demanding the resignation of the council members due to unpaid bills for services rendered.¹ The ferocity of the protest led commander Van den Berg of 12 Infantry Company to deploy his Quick Reaction Force to keep the situation under control. After Dutch military personnel had talked to representatives, the demonstrators dispersed peacefully.

The us predecessors of the Dutch military in Al Muthanna had hardly showed themselves in Al Khidr. Shortly after the us invasion force had passed through the town in March 2003, a group of twelve men led by a certain Said Malik – “an unsavoury and unreliable individual” according to political adviser Rentenaar – installed themselves as the town council.² The Americans did not formally recognise this council, but they did legitimise it by occasionally attending its meetings. As long as it was little more than a talking shop, without direct power and resources, the locals were not bothered. The problems began when at the end of July, just before his unit's departure, the us commander made available 350 million

dinar (about 220,000 US dollars) to the council's self-appointed public works branch. It was common at this time for interim US or British military rulers to donate large sums of money without issuing any instructions on their use or agreeing on accountability.³ The nonchalance with which the military used CPA funds was partly due to the origins of the money: confiscated funds from the deposed Baath party.

In the provincial capital As Samawah, where a US-installed town council was somewhat representative and functioned relatively well, such donations did not pose any difficulty. The 'town council' of Al Khidr, however, managed to dispose without a trace of one third of the budget (117 million dinar) in a short space of time. Enraged Al Khidr residents subsequently paid frequent visits to the temporary British Governorate Coordinator Maurice Bulmer and his Dutch political adviser Michel Rentenaar in the CPA building. They accused all twelve council members of lining their own pockets and claimed that seven of them had been members of the Baath party.⁴ The people wanted a new council.

The revolt in Al Khidr was a good excuse for the CPA and the Dutch to replace the corrupt town council. The question was how to form a body which was representative of the local population. Although democracy was an objective of the occupying authorities, the CPA forbade fully-fledged local elections for the time being. Experiences in the Balkans with so-called nation-building had taught that rushed elections were anything but a recipe for democratic success, and could even help 'undesirable' (i.e. radical nationalist, or in the case of Iraq, religious anti-democratic) leaders into positions of power. In both As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah, the Americans therefore applied an alternative and more manageable system, which would be used by Bulmer and Rentenaar in improved form in Al Khidr.

The US Government Support Team had experimented in As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah with an electoral group, known as a caucus. In the provincial capital, a group of forty influential figures had been appointed undemocratically by the US battalion commander. In Ar Rumaythah, the system was more representative. Here, in the second week of August, as one of the American GSR's final jobs, a new town council was installed following consultation with the local population. The old council in tribal and conservative Ar Rumaythah had appointed itself in May under the leadership of the fundamentalist Sheikh Fadhil Ashaara and, just as in Al Khidr, had subsequently been accepted temporarily by the Americans for lack of an alternative.⁵ Just before command of the province was handed over to the Dutch, Lieutenant Colonel O'Donahue disbanded this council on

the grounds of “fundamentalist views and conduct”.⁶ With a view to forming a new town council, posters were displayed containing the question: “Who do you think would be the best person to represent your city?” This consultation yielded a list of seventy names. A hand-picked committee of eight prominent locals selected twelve council members from this list. The technocratic suitability of the candidates for specific portfolios was decisive in this selection procedure, which lasted several hours.⁷

The general idea was that a caucus would select a new council in Al Khidr also. The composition had been structurally improved by Bulmer and Rentenaar. In this case, the 96-strong caucus was created following extensive consultation with the major political parties, tribes and religious groups. It then formulated portfolios, such as public security, electricity, agriculture and irrigation, and subsequently drew up a list of twelve people most suited to holding these administrative posts. It remained “(s)election”, as Rentenaar described it. Yet it did display improved insight and formed an acceptable alternative to direct elections, which the CPA still prohibited.

Unfortunately, partly due to the heightened tensions in the town, implementation in Al Khidr did not go entirely according to plan. Neither Bulmer and Rentenaar nor the Iraqis in the IRDC had thought to take the list of the 96 electors to the first caucus meeting at the town’s school on the evening of Thursday 14 August. Hundreds of excited locals flooded onto the premises from all directions when the vehicles containing the interim administrators and their Marine escort arrived. Without the list, no-one could check whether those present did indeed belong to the carefully selected caucus. Cancelling the meeting did not seem to be a feasible option. That would create even greater unrest. Emotions were already running high. Some of the crowd pushed and shoved their way into the school and started demanding unpaid wages. Someone else informed Colonel Bulmer in no uncertain terms that he was the head of a ten-thousand-strong tribe and that he would take it as a personal insult if the meeting did not go ahead. Continuing the election, however, also brought with it the risk of the new town council lacking sufficient support.

The foreign administrators were able to make themselves heard by banging loudly on the table. They proposed postponing the caucus meeting for three days until the next Saturday evening. This was accepted, but only on the condition that the old council was immediately removed from the town council building.⁸ A loud cheer went up when Bulmer accepted. The crowd immediately departed for the town council building. For the first time, political adviser Rentenaar was glad of the fuel shortage. He wrote:

“As our vehicles did have petrol, we arrived at the town council building ahead of the crowd (who were on foot). On arrival we were able to secure the building, with the much-appreciated support of the Dutch battalion’s 12th Company. After some time, the chairman of the old town council appeared and CPA administrator Bulmer ordered him to resign. Bulmer was wise enough not to mention the large amount of proof of corruption against the chairman. In his ‘dismissal speech’, Bulmer focused purely on the fact that the Al Khidr residents obviously wanted a new town council. After making some threats about subsequent tribal unrest in the town, the city council chair (Said Malik) accepted his dismissal and left the building.”⁹

However, this minor ‘coup’ in the service of the fragile democratisation process was not yet consolidated. Three days later, on the Saturday evening of the postponed elections, two hundred angry demonstrators assembled at the gates of the same school. It was evident that Said Malik had gathered the mob. Yet this time things were better coordinated and company commander Major Van den Berg and his Marines had positioned themselves discreetly but firmly in front of the school entrance. Following checks, they allowed those on the list of 96 electors to enter one by one. Political adviser Rentenaar could not entirely shake off an uneasy sense of “democracy at gunpoint”, but Malik’s henchmen eventually backed off.

That Saturday evening in Al Khidr an almost childlike excitement could be felt in the stifling classroom. The town council’s portfolios were written on a blackboard: fuel, water and sanitation, electricity, public order and police, agriculture and irrigation, public works, healthcare, education, administration and book-keeping. The electors wrote the name of their favourite candidate on a piece of paper. As there were too few pens available, they did so using very short pencils which a Dutch Marine had broken into pieces shortly before and – cursing – sharpened with his knife. “The little things democracy depends on,” the political adviser reflected.

The Iraqis elected one person to each post, greeted each time by loud applause. The end result was a town council comprising engineers, doctors, teachers and other well-educated individuals. In spite of the threats from the deposed Said Malik and his followers, the transition was peaceful. The experiment in Al Khidr seemed a success for the time being. Nevertheless, over the coming months, the town council would continue to come under pressure from the group around Malik and from other groups who had missed out on the positions of power.¹⁰

The 'Al Muthanna model'

Responsibility for the administration of Iraq by the short-staffed provincial CPA offices was gigantic and complex, chiefly due to the lack of clear guidelines from Baghdad and the many changes of policy. Prior to the invasion, Washington and London had given little thought to political and administrative reconstruction. In the spring of 2003, this meant that the appointment and auditing of provincial administrators were left to the military commanders in the field. In Al Muthanna, this led to the appointment of individuals such as Sheikh Sami, whose rise to power was in line with the American aim of a rapid transfer of sovereignty to a new Iraqi government. Pro-Western exiles were allocated a dominant role. Yet the arrival of Paul Bremer as the viceroy of Iraq heralded a new Coalition strategy. The CPA prepared itself for long-term occupation and pulled strings with a view to achieving the ideal of a modern, liberal-democratic Iraq.¹¹

Of the fifteen provinces outside the Kurdish region, in the late summer of 2003 Al Muthanna was leading the way with respect to the administrative build-up.¹² Yet the improvised town councils with their own authorities such as the 'Dutch' province now possessed did not match the new national policy. CPA South therefore tried to rein in Bulmer's team using unambiguous language. "I think there is rather too much gung-ho enthusiasm from the governorate level going on at the moment," deputy head Janet Rogan told the interim administration in As Samawah. The British diplomat warned that personnel who exceeded their mandates would be removed from their posts.¹³ There was even talk of disbanding those councils already installed. In the opinion of Bulmer, Rentenaar and Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman, however, the interference from CPA South had come too late. The real holders of power in Al Muthanna did not view it as an option to undo a situation which had already been evolving for the past two months.¹⁴

Both the CPA and the temporary national Iraqi Governing Council, set up by the Americans in Baghdad in July, displayed this type of centralist and disruptive tendency. Iraqi Governing Council members, for instance, insisted that their ministries should be given powers via local representatives and that they themselves should be able to appoint governors without the involvement of the population. Such a scenario would certainly not benefit Al Muthanna. Sheikh Sami's lobbying in Baghdad had won him a post as Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, which certainly increased the likelihood of his corrupt brother Khaled receiving a centrally appointed governorship. Incidentally, Khaled had

still not vacated the governor's residence, and immediately after Sami had become minister officials started receiving letters signed by 'Sheikh Khaled, The Governor'.¹⁵

After Dick Andrews succeeded Bulmer in early September as CPA Governorate Coordinator, Rentenaar regularly accompanied the American to Baghdad. Both diplomats tried in vain to obtain clarity on the selection procedures to be followed for provincial councils and governors and on the powers they were to have. Partly as a result of these visits Rentenaar's faith in the central CPA organisation dissipated rapidly. The creation of democracy in Iraq appeared to be far beyond the ability of the CPA. Pessimism and cynicism rapidly took hold among the international staff in the cordoned-off Green Zone in the city's centre, where the Authority was based.¹⁶ The administration department did produce a draft text on the responsibilities of local administrative bodies, but the document went unsigned for months. The interim administrators in Al Muthanna could not wait for this. The draft version seen by Rentenaar also contained bad news for local administrators, because it mainly listed what they were *not* allowed to do. For example, they were prohibited from dismissing civil servants or levying taxes.

When negotiations between the CPA and the Iraqi Governing Council on the new constitution and the path to Iraqi independence ground to a complete halt in September 2003, Baghdad gave a freer rein to local administrative initiatives. This measure was not so much the fruit of new policy as the result of not having any at all. "At CPA Central, it was openly admitted that no policy would be formulated for the time being relating to the authorities of the provincial administrators and advisory bodies," Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman reported to The Hague.¹⁷ He and Rentenaar pressed Andrews to take up this *carte blanche* quickly. The Dutch were feeling pressure from the political parties and tribes to set up a provincial administrative body.¹⁸ Rentenaar saw the 'window of opportunity' for creative solutions at the local level closing rapidly. "The Iraqis [otherwise] will revert to the old, familiar but tough, centralist and poorly-functioning patterns" he claimed.¹⁹

In the meantime, the problem of the governor remained unresolved. Andrews, Swijgman and Rentenaar all agreed on the shortcomings of Sheikh Sami and the disruptive role of his maffioso brother Khaled, but not on how to tackle the problem. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman argued in favour of keeping Sami for the time being for reasons of stability. Andrews, on the other hand, insisted on the immediate dismissal of the interim governor. As a middle way, Rentenaar proposed that a caucus select a deputy governor, who would enable Sami to leave the post without loss of face, using his duties as

a minister in Baghdad as an excuse. Andrews nevertheless pushed through Sami's immediate dismissal.²⁰ According to Swijgman the American CPA administrator thereby ignored local customs such as maintaining respect, patience and harmony. In the view of the battle group commander, Andrews' lack of cultural sensitivity even made him a security threat.²¹

A conflict with the newly-appointed Governorate Coordinator seemed inevitable. Cooperation between him and the Dutch commander, the Dutch political adviser, the GST, the RTI and even the British and Iraqi personnel in his own support staff reached a low already at the end of September 2003. Andrews left the CPA building less and less often and, in contrast to his predecessor, rarely attended town council meetings. On most occasions, his Dutch political adviser went instead.²² Andrews' poor performance was recognised in the higher CPA echelons, but it took until November for them to replace him.²³

However, the rather blunt actions of the US administrator regarding Sheikh Sami meant that, in addition to the election of a new provincial council, the path was open to select a new governor too.²⁴ Direct elections were still not an option, so an alternative selection procedure had to be worked out. Alongside Rentenaar, British RTI official Alistair Blunt became the most important architect of the subsequent improvised model. Like Rentenaar, Blunt spoke Arabic. He had recently gained experience in the RTI Local Governance Programme in Baghdad. The Briton also feared a return to a centrally-governed Iraq.²⁵ In his view, the CPA appeared to be pinning all its hopes blindly on the Iraqi Governing Council, while that body – filled with exiles – enjoyed very little legitimacy in the eyes of most Iraqis. CPA chief Bremer still possessed the power to appoint governors, but sooner or later this might be claimed by the Governing Council. Rentenaar and Blunt felt they needed to act fast.

On paper, the diplomats had already made substantial progress in working out a Governorate Council which was as representative as possible. They planned for a body of forty councillors, a number which was laid down in the Iraqi constitution. Within this institution, twelve seats were created for representatives of the tribes, twelve for political parties, twelve for technocrats, two for religious representatives and two for women. Thus, the structure complied with the wishes of the tribes and political parties to play an advisory role in the new system.

Deciding on the distribution of seats was a highly complex process and led to heated debate. There were 24 tribes in Al Muthanna, which ultimately opted to hold the twelve seats by rotation. Opponents of this arrangement,

mainly technocrats, argued that the tribes would gain too much influence. In their eyes, the tribes embodied a return of the country to the old ways. In their turn, the tribes thought that although the technocrats were educated and experts in their fields, they represented no one in rural Al Muthanna. Of the twelve political parties, each of which would have one seat, the two largest were suspect too, as their leaders had spent a long time as refugees in Iran. These were the highly religious *Al Majlis ala lil Thawra al Islamiyah fil al Iraq* (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq – abbreviated to SCIRI) and *Al Dawa al Islamiyah* (Dawa).

Political adviser Rentenaar also had to do his utmost to get a Sunni cleric accepted next to a Shiite leader in the two religious council seats. He ultimately succeeded thanks to the support of the charismatic and erudite local Shiite imam Ali Mahdi. Despite widespread disagreement amongst all the male representatives, they at least agreed on one issue: two seats for women out of forty were far too many, and the foreigners' fixed demand for giving women a role in the council exhibited crude cultural insensitivity and Western arrogance.²⁶

The Al Muthanna Governate Council met for the first time on 3 October 2003. Its official inauguration took place at the CPA building, in front of the cameras of the local and popular television station Samawah TV. The carte blanche with respect to setting up administrative bodies had thus been applied in a daring, rapid and creative manner. The term 'Al Muthanna model' was born, although it would be several months before it became well-known. The election of the new governor was to be the first major test for the new provincial council. There were twenty candidates. This number was reduced to six after the first ballot. The second ballot on 14 October was preceded by a campaign which focused on the council itself, but also on the population of Al Muthanna, via television and posters. Although the inhabitants of Al Muthanna could not vote themselves, the campaign and the candidates' qualities were daily topics of conversation in the teahouses. Mild election fever and a positive ambience were said to be palpable.

On the day of the election, the organisers did all they could to emphasise the transparency of the process. Two judges from As Samawah, who were present to monitor the proceedings, helped 'Master of Ceremonies' Rentenaar hold up the ballot box at each round to show those present and the television cameras that the box was empty. The council members cast their votes in an enclosed voting booth and then placed their ballot papers in the large box, a painted wastepaper basket bearing the text: The Voice of Al Muthanna. When casting their votes, some council members posed

at length for the cameras as if they were presidential candidates.²⁷ Of the six candidates remaining after the first ballot, Mohammed Ali Hassan Abbas al Hassani was the frontrunner. As he did not receive the required majority of 21 votes (but only 20) of the 40 votes in the second ballot, a third ballot was required. Al Hassani won the final ballot convincingly over his rival Hakem Khazal Hashaan, leader of the tribal Union of the Middle Euphrates party, who shortly before had returned to his birth country after 23 years in exile in Germany.²⁸

The new governor, a member of the Albu Hassan tribe, had been assistant to the court in his home town of Ar Rumaythah in the 1970s. He had deserted from the Iraqi army during the Iran-Iraq war, after which he had joined the SCIRI resistance in Iran. He had worked his way up to regional commander in the *Faylaq al Badr* (Badr Brigades), the armed section of the SCIRI. At the time of the US invasion in 2003, Al Hassani was leader of the paramilitary organisation in the Middle Euphrates region and until June he had held a seat in the temporary town council in Ar Rumaythah.²⁹ In what, by Iraqi standards, had been a fairly democratic selection procedure, Hassani's close ties with a large number of tribes and his status as a resistance fighter had probably been decisive factors in his victory.

On Saturday 18 October, the governor was inaugurated by CPA Governorate Coordinator Andrews. Dressed in an Iranian-style suit, Al Hassani did not attempt to hide the close ties between that country and his SCIRI party. He would not prove to be a convinced democrat, but neither was he a blunt autocrat. In Rentenaar's opinion, he was above all a sly politician who was open to suggestions for change and improvement.³⁰ Al Hassani spoke softly and with great self-confidence. He thanked the people of Al Muthanna and praised the CPA for the properly-conducted election process. Andrews received this compliment with some pride, but he also referred to the central role played by his Dutch political adviser, who incidentally was absent on leave.³¹

Another Dutch political adviser was present, however. Rentenaar's colleague Marcel de Vink had travelled to As Samawah from Basra for the occasion. In his capacity as deputy political adviser to the British division commander, this Dutch diplomat had quickly gained a prominent position in Major General Lamb's team. In Basra, where tensions were rising rapidly between the Shiite parties and their militias, De Vink was heavily involved in political and governmental matters.³² His turbulent experiences caused him to be pleasantly surprised at the consensus which appeared to exist among the new administrators in Al Muthanna. There was confidence in the new

governor, who as a person exhibited a number of significant characteristics: he was deeply religious and therefore representative of conservative Al Muthanna, yet was viewed as a progressive as he was willing to work with the Coalition, but above all he was known to be a 'strong man'. De Vink thought that troublemakers would think twice before making mischief against this former resistance commander.³³ Al Hassani might be the kind of man needed, as there were turbulent times ahead.

Visitors from The Hague

In late October 2003, the Permanent Parliamentary Committees for Foreign Affairs and Defence and Chief of Defense Staff Admiral Kroon paid their first visit to the Dutch military units in Iraq. The end of 1 NLBG's operation was approaching and 2 NLBG was about to begin its tour. With the onset of winter, the weather was also starting to turn.³⁴ The hot summer was over. During the three-day visit, temperatures did not exceed 28 degrees Celsius and it was very cloudy, windy and dusty. At night, temperatures plummeted, and instead of the air conditioning the heating was switched on in the prefabs on the Dutch camps.

The appointment of the provincial Governate Council and the selection of a new governor were major political success stories. The ad hoc administrative model still had to prove itself in practice, but the shaky foundations which the Dutch had encountered at the end of July had been well shored up. Al Muthanna had government structures which possessed some measure of legitimacy and was therefore ahead of all the other provinces in Iraq. In spite of the difficult relations with CPA coordinator Andrews, the Dutch generally worked well with his Governorate Team and affiliated organisations such as the RTI and the IRDC. The problems involving former governor Sami and his brother Khaled had been solved. The province could still justifiably be called the safest in Iraq south of Kurdish territory. Moreover, the Dutch military had already spent nearly three million US dollars on reconstruction projects.³⁵

The level of stability and security in the province could be partly ascribed to the administrative build-up, but the 'Al Muthanna model' could not be presented to the visiting MPS as a Dutch success. After all, the government had stipulated that the Dutch contingent could not be responsible for politico-administrative matters. The real role the Dutch had played in Al Muthanna therefore had to remain hidden. Prior to the visit by the Parliamentary Committees and the CDS to the CPA building in

As Samawah, Rentenaar agreed with Andrews that the latter would take all the credit. Shortly before the arrival of the politicians, however, a fierce argument broke out between the Governorate Coordinator and Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman, which apparently caused the CPA administrator expressly to mention Rentenaar's initiatives on behalf of the CPA seven times during his five-minute presentation and to praise the Dutch adviser lavishly for the administrative build-up in the province.³⁶

The actual influence on the local government of Rentenaar's military boss did not go unnoticed either. Member of Parliament for the Labour Party Frans Timmermans was impressed with the way Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman was seen to deal with local influential figures. During a lavish meal of rice and lamb in a large bedouin tent, hosted by a very hospitable Sheikh Sami, Timmermans witnessed the commander negotiating about access to water for local farmers. After visiting both the British headquarters and the Dutch troops, it became clear to him "that it is hard to draw a line between the occupying power and the military forces who are there to provide stability". The Iraqis saw all foreign military personnel – including the Dutch – as the new power holders. "It had all sounded so simple in The Hague," Timmermans recounted in his weblog. "The Netherlands is not an occupying force and the military personnel are there to bring stability." The reality was quite different, he concluded. Although his party had been critical of Dutch participation in the allied operation, he did not disapprove of this development. He was impressed by the "highly-motivated, professional Dutch personnel":

"They do their best in all kinds of ways to help the Iraqis to set up civil administration. Thus it is logical that they become involved in administration, which again just goes to show that it is almost impossible to distinguish between us and the so-called occupying force in practice. This was also demonstrated during our meeting with the local administrators, who had been helped to power via a system of indirect elections invented by the Americans [sic]. Their questions for us were as honest as they were direct: what exactly is the Netherlands going to do to help us? They expect a kind of interim administration because, as they themselves admit, they cannot yet run [the province] themselves."³⁷

The PvdA MP also wrote admiringly of Operation Greenfield, the Marines' operation against the illegal arms trade at the sheep market in As Samawah. This crimefighting operation, which 1 NLBG conducted entirely on its own initiative, had taken place one week prior to the parliamentarian's visit

and a video recording made for the court in As Samawah was shown to the visitors by Swijgman and his staff.³⁸

On their return to the Netherlands, the members of the Permanent Parliamentary Committees posed no critical questions about the delicate theme of occupation and the administrative and police roles assumed by the NLBG in spite of the caveats. This was remarkable as this topic had been highly sensitive a few months earlier during the political decision-making process. The Members of Parliament were apparently satisfied with Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman's explanation that he was very aware of the fact that some aspects of Dutch operations were very close to the limits of the mandate or that some even temporarily exceeded it.³⁹

Now that the operation was up and running properly, the Members of Parliament turned their attention to a completely different issue: troop safety. In Basra, they had gathered from a briefing by the Chief of Staff MND South-East, Colonel Richard Barrons, that there was a suspicion that foreign fighters were entering Iraq via the Dutch sector, among other areas. The British Colonel could not go into great detail as MND South-East possessed little intelligence on the matter. Nevertheless, the enemy combatants were represented in his presentation by a large red arrow from Saudi Arabia via Al Muthanna to central Iraq.⁴⁰ There was also a persistent rumour that these infiltrators might be using the desert province as a staging area. As monitoring was virtually impossible in the vast desert region, it could not be ruled out that foreign fighters had for some time been moving among the regular, often nomadic travellers.

The Dutch Members of Parliament were also concerned about the complaint heard during the visit that the British and Americans shared insufficient intelligence with the Dutch, especially in relation to these infiltrations. On 4 November, MPS Geert Wilders (VVD), Camiel Eurlings (CDA) and Bert Koenders (PvdA) put a number of critical questions on this matter to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence.⁴¹ The issue received wide attention in The Hague as the decision to extend the Dutch operation by six months, until the summer of 2004, was imminent. The politicians' visit to Al Muthanna had given them a generally positive impression, but Parliament was particularly concerned about the increasing armed resistance against the Coalition and growing violence in Iraq in general.

Around the time of the visit by the Parliamentary Committees, Dutch forces in Al Muthanna had encountered the first mass expression of civil discontent. In the early morning of 29 October, a surprisingly fierce demonstration had taken place in front of the CPA building. About 250 angry

young men blocked the road and expressed their dissatisfaction by throwing stones at the building and at the Marines of 11 Infantry Company protecting the site. The reason for the protest were unfulfilled promises in the first CPA-led aid project in the province – a major employment programme. As CPA personnel were absent at that moment, Major Nommensen of the Dutch Government Support Team faced the spokesmen of the crowd. He managed to calm them, after which the demonstrators dispersed.

The next morning, however, the protesters gathered once again. To make matters worse, at the same time a large US Army convoy tried to force its way through along the main road past the CPA building (Route Jackson). This was a recipe for escalation, as Al Muthanna residents had started to take severe umbrage at the many military convoys which aggressively thundered through their city. There were regular injuries and even deaths among the civilian population as a result of the tactical posture of these convoys. The crowd soon turned on the Americans and threw stones at them. The US troops responded by firing several warning shots. One bullet hit a demonstrator in the leg.⁴²

The incident pointed to dissatisfaction among the locals which exceeded the level of understandable anger at the rude way in which the convoys were conducted. This was most tangible in and around Al Muthanna's second town, Ar Rumaythah. During an earlier briefing for the visiting politicians, the commander of 13 Infantry Company, Major Schooneman, bluntly related that "something was brewing". He reported that the locals generally greeted the Marines in a friendly fashion during patrols. Yet in some villages along the road to Basra his men had been pelted with stones and occasionally confronted with a universally recognised gesture: moving the index finger from left to right across the throat.⁴³ The strained and aggressive conduct of US military personnel in supply convoys was partly to blame for this, according to Schooneman. But there was more to it. At a roundabout in Al Warka, a settlement near Ar Rumaythah, Marines came across a banner in English and Arabic bearing the text: "All laws made by the Coalition Forces are unacceptable, refuse them totally."⁴⁴ Al Muthanna was starting to exhibit the hallmarks of a national problem. The legitimacy of the occupation and the new Iraqi authorities was openly being questioned.

Parties and militias

In the second half of 2003, the Iraqis increasingly turned against the Coalition. The Shiite south witnessed the rise of self-confident political

parties, a hardening internal power struggle and an increasingly violent rebellion by a radical group that opposed any type of cooperation with the occupying powers. Forces were being unleashed which the CPA and the Coalition troops could not control. People were increasingly negative about the foreigners and their vacillating and inefficient policies. The percentage of Iraqis in the south who viewed the Coalition Forces as occupiers in a negative sense was already high at 47 per cent in August 2003. A majority of 61 per cent thought that the international troops should leave the country as quickly as possible. In the months that followed, this number of dissatisfied citizens would rise to over 80 per cent of the population.⁴⁵

This development had not been foreseen. Almost all of the political groups of Shiite background had after all – in line with expectations – shown themselves willing to cooperate with the occupying forces, to whom they were grateful for having deposed the cruel Baath regime, ending decades of oppression. The Shiites knew they would benefit from the regime change.⁴⁶ The solution therefore appeared to be to wait patiently and gain power peacefully. They nevertheless had a totally different agenda from the US- and UK-led occupying authorities. While the CPA and the Iraqi Governing Council in Baghdad were busy laying the foundations for a secular democracy, most Shiites were looking to their spiritual leaders. This *Marji'yya*, a group of prominent Islamic scholars, had long been politically oriented and had played a leading role in the 1920 rebellion against the British. In the 1950s and 60s, they were also involved in the founding of organised political Islam, which was a reaction to the advent of 'foreign' political ideologies such as nationalism, socialism and communism. During the (socialist-nationalist) Baath dictatorship, some, such as Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Bakir al Sadr in the 1970s and his nephew, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al Sadr, in the 1990s, had opposed Saddam Hussein. They were murdered by Saddam's security troops in 1980 and 1999 respectively, as were thousands of their followers.

The main leaders in the *Marji'yya* hierarchy were Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al Khoei and, after his death in 1992, Grand Ayatollah Ali al Hussein al Sistani. In 2003, Sistani was the most important religious authority for the Shiites and a political power factor which the CPA had to take into account. The Americans and British initially neglected to do so when they set up the interim Iraqi Governing Council and announced that they wanted to draw up a new constitution prior to a general election in the summer of 2003. Sistani opposed this move. The allies had by then already lost their main potential ally among the ayatollahs. The son of

former Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al Khoei, the moderate cleric Abdul-Majid al Khoei, had returned to the holy city of Najaf with US support in April. His assassination by order of the young radical populist Muqtada al Sadr in Najaf on 10 April signalled the start of a violent internal power struggle among the Shiites.⁴⁷

Al Sadr did not shy away from confrontation with the traditional authorities in the Shiite community. Shortly after Al Khoei's murder, he had Sistani's house in Najaf besieged by armed followers. Neighbouring tribes went to the aid of the Grand Ayatollah and drove away the *Al Sadriyyun*, the 'Sadrist'. Muqtada had made his point, however. He was only thirty years old and had had no religious education of any significance. He could nevertheless rely on great popularity among the supporters of his murdered father and great-uncle. His religious-nationalist agenda, which was based on his irreconcilable resistance to the foreign invaders, struck a note among the impoverished Shiite lower classes, especially in the cities. Al Sadr's party also had an armed section, which he called *Jeish al Mahdi* (the Mahdi Army).

Many important religious leaders were attached to organised political movements such as the Dawa party, the Fadhila party and the SCIRI. Influential ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al Hakim was the spiritual leader of SCIRI, the largest of these parties. He spent years in exile in Iran before returning to Iraq in 2003. On 29 August, he was assassinated in a suicide car bombing outside the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf, a holy Shiite site, in an attack killing about one hundred people.⁴⁸

The majority of the Shiite political players had in common that they accorded Islam a central role in society, laws and legislation and public administration. As a result, they had numerous clashes with the CPA during the 2003-2004 year of occupation, mostly about the new Iraqi constitution and the way in which sovereignty should be transferred to the Iraqis. The Americans, determined not to allow an Iranian-style theocracy to develop in Iraq, were wary of the growing dominance of religiously motivated parties which all received some form of support from the large neighbour to the east.⁴⁹ The 'democratisation' of Southern Iraq was therefore not happening in the way preferred by the US and UK. Yet although the occupying authorities and the Shiite parties clashed continuously, they conducted their conflicts peacefully. This type of working relationship did not develop between the Coalition and the Sadrists however. Muqtada al Sadr opted for violent resistance from an early stage.

The fast-growing armed branch of the radical Sadrists, the Mahdi Army, had been set up in July 2003. In October, the movement proclaimed

itself the new government of Iraq and for the first time the Mahdi Army sought armed confrontation in the Sadr City district in Baghdad, as well as in the cities of Basra and Karbala. In the last, the militia also fought the armed guards of Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani in an attempt to conquer the all-important Imam Ali Mosque. Bulgarian Coalition troops intervened. The Mahdi Army was eventually stopped.⁵⁰

In the meantime, CPA chief Paul Bremer decided that Al Sadr should be arrested, formally on suspicion of involvement in the murder of Al Khoei. But Bremer was thwarted. Firstly, Washington stepped on the brakes, out of fear of instability in the short term. Secondly, the Polish, Spanish and British allies were afraid of an uprising among the Shiites too. Thirdly, Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani, who, like his fellow clerics, did not take Al Sadr at all seriously as a religious leader, let it be known that an arrest would simply unnecessarily boost the stature of the young upstart.⁵¹ What all these parties had in common was that they underestimated the influence of the young leader. At the same time, they were afraid of the consequences of an armed confrontation.⁵²

The Dutch battle group initially paid little attention to the Sadr movement. The organisation was still rather insignificant in Al Muthanna. Interest in Al Sadr was only temporarily increased in both August and October when British divisional headquarters requested information on the movement's position in the province for the purposes of planning. On the basis of the information of their US predecessors, Dutch intelligence officers came up with the names of people who had possible links with Al Sadr. One was Fadhil Ashaara, the chair of the temporary town council in Ar Rumaythah which had appointed itself in May and been deposed by the Americans in July. Ashaara had subsequently left for an unknown destination. It later turned out that he had sought contact with the Sadr movement in Najaf and returned to Ar Rumaythah in November 2003 to open a Sadr party office and to start the construction of a religious school.⁵³ As of yet, there was little support for the Sadr movement in Al Muthanna. In late October 2003, 1 NLBG did identify the first recruitment posters for the Mahdi Army in the Ar Rumaythah area. Yet the problems caused by Al Sadr and his militia were at that time felt only in the surrounding provinces.⁵⁴

Mounting threats

At that stage of the occupation, the most immediate threat seemed to be from Sunnis. The Dutch battle group saw the so-called 'Former Regime Elements' of the Baath party as the greatest danger, albeit not necessarily a very severe

one. There was also the entry and onward travel of foreign fighters who joined the jihad against the Coalition in Central Iraq. The violence perpetrated against allied troops by such groups was very real. On 12 November 2003, a large car bomb destroyed the headquarters of the Italian *Carabinieri* (gendarmerie force) in the town of Nasiriyah, in the neighbouring province of Dhi Qar. It killed eighteen Italians and eight Iraqis. A Sunni group claimed responsibility. A similar attack was carried out on a convoy of Spaniards in the town of Latifiyah in the centre of the country in November. Seven people were killed. The murder of two Japanese diplomats that same month was generally viewed as an attempt to stop Japan from pushing ahead with its plans to deploy six hundred military personnel for reconstruction works in Al Muthanna. The two Japanese were well known to the Dutch thanks to their reconnaissance operation in As Samawah earlier on.⁵⁵

The 'Balkanisation' of Iraq led to greater assertiveness by the now established Shiite political parties, of which Dawa and SCIRI were the most important. At all levels in Iraq the Coalition had daily dealings with these groups, which as former rebels against the Baath regime possessed substantial armed militias. Since the summer, these parties had been pressing for a greater role for their paramilitaries in maintaining public order and safety. In their eyes, the deadly attack on SCIRI leader Al Hakim on 29 August proved that Coalition troops were incapable of guaranteeing security. Armed followers of Dawa and SCIRI therefore started conducting patrols in several towns in southern Iraq. Also Al Sadr militia were seen wearing Mahdi Army badges in early September. In Al Muthanna, too, armed militia members were increasingly visible on the streets, as security guards at political party offices or acting as guards to clerics or worshippers. In As Samawah, they even set up vehicle checkpoints for a while.⁵⁶ The Dutch battle group acted wherever possible. The Marines confiscated weapons if they came across armed militia members during patrols. They also observed the Dawa party office for a few days from a concealed position on the hospital roof.⁵⁷

Although the Dutch were operating at full capacity, there were ever-louder calls for a stronger military presence.⁵⁸ According to ex-CPA administrator Bulmer, such complaints could largely be explained by the highly physical perception of security among Iraqis. "Oddly, after so many years of totalitarian rule, they took comfort in roadblocks, searches and static security guards. We preferred our security operations to be less visible and intelligence-driven instead," the British Colonel explained.⁵⁹ 'Intel-driven operations' was the buzzword among Coalition troops at this time, but it was

doubtful whether foreign military personnel possessed sufficiently thorough intelligence to be able to conduct this type of operational concept properly.

The additional policing activities of SCIRI's Badr Brigades threatened the state's monopoly on the use of force as much as Dawa's militia patrols. However, the latter organisation received more negative attention. The leadership of SCIRI succeeded in transforming its resistance movement into a political party much better than the Dawa leaders, who continued to communicate via inflammatory proclamations.⁶⁰ Signs of political maturity and tact were much appreciated by the Coalition and resulted in greater support, whether deserved or not. In order to meet the political parties' long-held wish for a greater role in security issues, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman decided to set up a Provincial Security Committee for Al Muthanna.⁶¹ In addition to the Dutch commander, this body contained the three main Shiite parties (SCIRI, Dawa and a new party called 15 Shaban), two tribal chiefs, the provincial police commissioner and the province's director of security. The last official was a representative of the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior.

On 8 October, Swijgman chaired the first of the weekly committee meetings at Camp Smitty, during which, after some discussion, he permitted the parties up to district level to keep four rifles and a pistol in their party buildings. Party leaders were also permitted to carry a pistol, but on condition that they always carried an official permit. The parties also promised to cease playing an active role in maintaining order and security and to refrain completely from patrols and setting up roadblocks. Similar consultation bodies were set up in the towns of Ar Rumaythah and Al Khidr, chaired by the Dutch company commanders.⁶²

The security committee meetings often got bogged down in a catalogue of complaints. There were two dominant themes here: the right of the parties and their militias to be able to bear (more) arms and the total 'de-Baathification' of the authorities, in particular the police. The Shiite political parties all wanted a dominant role in the state apparatus, and as long as they did not possess that, they tried to weaken the existing organisation by pressing at each meeting for the dismissal of anyone suspected of having connections with the former regime. Although these accusations were occasionally justified, they were usually employed as a gambit in the power struggle. One moot point, for instance, was the persistent rumour of Baath membership of the provincial police chief, Colonel Faddil Abbas Ali. This story probably originated at SCIRI, the party which was trying to obtain control over the police organisation via the new governor, Al Hassani.⁶³

In spite of the power struggle and the many complaints, Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman thought the security committee operated reasonably well after a while. The new governor ultimately took over as chair. Swijgman was pleased at this development, as he generally thought that Al Hassani acted decisively and it fitted in with his objective to take a step back and give the local civilian administrators more space and responsibility.⁶⁴ Moreover, the committee had a useful function as a consultation forum, precisely because of the wrangling for power and influence. The lines of communication between the various groups remained open, and this gave the Dutch a reasonable picture of the – shifting – balance of power between parties and officials. An example was the conflict between Colonel Faddil and governor Al Hassani. In December, the provincial police chief was forced to step down due to Al Hassani's machinations.⁶⁵ The SCIRI governor subsequently promoted the organisation's number two, Lieutenant Colonel Kareem Halaibet Menaher al Zayadi (a former member of the Republican Guard with a Special Forces background), to the top post and made him interim police chief.⁶⁶

The creation of the Provincial Security Committee meant that Al Muthanna was again ahead of its neighbouring provinces in an administrative sense. In mid-September, the British divisional headquarters launched a similar plan for all four of the southern sectors. Yet in Basra and Maysan the influence of the militia of the Dawa party, the Badr Brigades of SCIRI and the Iraqi Hezbollah movement had become significantly greater than in Al Muthanna. As a result, Major General Lamb had to make far-reaching concessions and partially legalised the armed groups. He acted in line with CPA Central, which also accepted that it was impossible to prohibit militias in view of the small footprint of Coalition troops and largely ineffectual Iraqi security forces. Instead, militias were 'temporarily' institutionalised as auxiliary troops, 'Local Security Forces', a decision which later proved difficult to reverse.⁶⁷

Change of command and mission extension

On Thursday 13 November 2003, the change-of-command ceremony took place between 1 NLBG and 2 NLBG. The second Dutch detachment for Iraq, built around the Second Marine Battalion led by Lieutenant Colonel Richard Oppelaar, had already started its tour on 5 November. The composition of the second contingent was almost identical to that of the first. Of the three regular infantry companies, 21 Infantry Company moved into the camp in Ar Rumaythah, 22 Infantry Company operated from the

main base near As Samawah and 23 Infantry Company established itself at the compound near Al Khidr.

The newcomers' starting position was quite different from that of 1 NLBG in July 2003, in both a positive and a negative sense. Oppelaar and his troops benefited from the firm foundations laid by the First Marine Battalion in the construction of the three bases, as well as the intensive patrols, which were increasingly being conducted jointly with the Iraqi police and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps. The information position of the second detachment was consequently better. During their pre-deployment preparation period, the commander, staff officials and subordinate commanders had access to extensive background information comprising reports and intelligence summaries sent to the Netherlands by 1 NLBG. Oppelaar was impressed by the 'intelligence picture' they obtained in this manner.⁶⁸ 2 NLBG's operational pace was high from the start partly due to the cooler weather which facilitated more intense patrolling. There were also positive developments on the civil side. In addition to the promise of millions of additional US dollars in construction funds from Coalition resources and continuity in administrative terms thanks to the presence of political adviser Rentenaar, the Dutch were able to cooperate well with the new CPA coordinator, the US diplomat James (Jim) Soriano.⁶⁹

The downside faced by 2 NLBG was the increased threat. In November, no fewer than 110 Coalition troops were killed, while an average of 30 to 40 had lost their lives in previous months.⁷⁰ Immediately after the car bomb in Nasiriyah, the number of reports of suspected suicide bombers and cars allegedly packed with explosives shot up in Al Muthanna, although most of these reports proved to be false. One of the first measures following the attack in Nasiriyah was improved protection for the Coalition's most vulnerable soft target, the CPA headquarters in As Samawah centre. Fears of a similar attack led to Oppelaar's decision that his Government Support Team, the political adviser and CPA personnel would sleep at Camp Smitty and only work in the CPA building during office hours.⁷¹ One lane of the main road immediately behind the building was cordoned off using shipping containers. Access to the location was severely restricted and the Marines on guard duty were issued with anti-tank weapons.⁷²

The deterioration in the security situation came at a very bad time for the Dutch government and placed a lot of political pressure on the Dutch contingent. With the possible extension of the operation beyond January 2004 now on the agenda, the political debate became dominated by the security issue. The attack in Nasiriyah on 12 November received extensive

media coverage and Minister of Defence Kamp had appeared on the Dutch television programme *NOVA* that evening to calm fears. All this happened shortly after the Dutch Members of Parliament Wilders, Eurlings and Koenders tabled their critical questions on the intelligence position of the Dutch on 4 November.

In the second half of November, in response to rumours of possible infiltrations by foreign fighters, 2 NLBG deployed its reconnaissance platoon together with ninety Iraqi border police (IBP) to obtain a better picture of the southern border area.⁷³ In the same period, the new contingent drew up plans for setting up two Forward Operating Bases (FOBs) in order to establish a more permanent presence in the desert to intercept and discourage traffickers and infiltrators. In the first week of December, 23 Infantry Company built camp Amalia (named after the newly-born Dutch princess) near Al Bussayah. 22 Infantry Company set up camp Victoria near As Salman.⁷⁴ Around the two platoon locations, the Marines regularly set up roadblocks to search cars heading for the border. Units also conducted patrols along Route Milwaukee, the only and seemingly endless road through the desert to the border, and helicopters occasionally dropped Marines at various locations.⁷⁵

Despite these measures, implemented under the code name Operation Desert Eagle, the critical Members of Parliament in the Netherlands pushed for additional resources. The question became politically linked to cuts to the Defence budget announced in June 2003, which resulted in a bureaucratic struggle between the Air Force, Navy and Army.⁷⁶ Proof of the operational usefulness of resources in Iraq was viewed as one way of preventing cuts. In late August, 1 NLBG had already reported on a general shortage within MND South-East of ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance) resources, such as manned and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft and satellites. Solutions were discussed with the Defence Staff. Director for Operations Cobelens proposed the use of Apache combat helicopters in a reconnaissance role. NLBG commander Swijgman on the other hand thought the flying time of these helicopters to be too restricted and their appearance too aggressive. He defined a requirement which only the Naval Air Arm's P3-C Orion patrol aircraft could fulfill, without explicitly requesting that aircraft. The Orions, originally submarine hunters, had recently been modernised and their infrared cameras had proved their usefulness over land in recent operations in Afghanistan.⁷⁷ However, since June all the Orions had been on the list of Defence material to be disposed of.

The political debate on the extension of the Dutch operation and the attack on the Italians in Nasiriyah led to the matter being prioritised in November. At the Dutch Ministry of Defence, a wide range of possibilities were investigated with a view to reinforcing 2 NLBG. On 21 November, Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar was informed by telephone of the deployment options. Just like Swijgman, he expressed a preference for the deployment of Orion patrol aircraft, but knew this option was politically sensitive due to the budget cuts. Already two months earlier, the Chief of the Defence Staff had warned that he did not want to hear the ‘O word’ again.⁷⁸ Oppelaar expressed his misgivings about the two other options: Apaches, as previously suggested by Cobelens; or the deployment of a company of the Royal Netherlands Army Special Forces Regiment (KCR) fulfilling the role of long-distance reconnaissance unit.

Four days later, the commander of 2 NLBG was ordered to prepare for the arrival of the Commando Corps company, comprising a staff, two platoons of three teams each, and support.⁷⁹ The unit of about 75 ‘Green Berets’ and an extra Chinook transport helicopter were deployed for six weeks in order to contribute to the situational awareness of 2 NLBG in the southern part of the province. The battle group raised objections that went beyond the collective ego of the Marine Corps, which had obviously been dented due to headlines such as “Commandos to protect Marines” and “Marines need additional protection”.⁸⁰ Various media, basing themselves on what had been communicated by the Defence organisation, suggested that Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar had himself requested Special Forces support, while in fact, Oppelaar had expressly aired his doubts about the feasibility of the planned deployment.⁸¹

In Oppelaar’s opinion, the ‘upper deck’ was micro-managing his operation. What also bothered him was the fact that he had not even been instructed by his division commander, Major General Lamb, to guard the border more closely. A month previously, the British general had said during a visit to As Samawah that it was pointless to try keeping the border water-tight.⁸² This was therefore an all-Dutch initiative. If there really was a requirement for this operation, Oppelaar insisted it would be a great deal more efficient to conduct stand-off surveillance from the air. The new Contingent Commander in Shaiba, Colonel Karel van Gijtenbeek, also expressed his amazement at the course of action being taken. Arrangements had just been made with the British on the extra deployment of the division’s ISTAR resources. Following a telephone conversation, the Colonel concluded that the deployment of the Special Forces company had to be a political manoeuvre.⁸³ The support of the

Dutch Parliament for an extension to the Iraq mission as a whole hinged on the measure.⁸⁴

Six commando teams were involved in Operation Close Watch, which started on 18 December. The mission was conducted in parallel to Operation Desert Eagle. It was terminated after four weeks. During that period, the commandos observed border posts and actively sought out potential terrorists in the Muthanna desert. They were unable, however, to report on anything particularly threatening, other than the fact that there were signs of intensive trafficking, mainly in drugs. No-one in The Hague suggested an extension to the desert reconnaissance operation after one month. Public and political attention to the deployment of the Special Forces and to the 'intelligence problem' had vanished almost entirely by then. Fifteen commandos remained in As Samawah to support the Marines in training the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the paramilitary organisation for internal security. This and other Security Sector Reform efforts had become the Coalition Forces' top priority in Iraq as a result of serious policy changes in Washington DC.

Accelerated transfer of sovereignty

CPA chief Paul Bremer's ambitious programme for the long-term occupation of Iraq was thwarted that winter by the all-out Sunni uprising in Central Iraq and by the increasingly insecure situation in the south. President Bush was facing elections and the administration realised that the occupation of Iraq was fuelling both the Sunni and the emerging Shiite insurgencies.⁸⁵ Since 1 May 2003, when he announced the end of 'major combat operations' on board the aircraft carrier *uss Abraham Lincoln*, more American troops had been killed than during the advance on Baghdad. There was growing pressure on Bush to bring the troops home. The Iraqis would have to take on responsibility for governance and security as soon as possible. The war – the term was again being used – had to be 'Iraqified'.

Eight months after the fall of Baghdad, the Coalition thus changed its occupation policy for a second time. Late in October 2003, the White House took closer control of the matter by giving National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice rather than Defense Secretary Rumsfeld chief responsibility for Iraq policy. On 15 November, Paul Bremer reached an agreement with the Iraqi Governing Council which determined that the transfer of sovereignty to an Iraqi government would take place on 30 June 2004.⁸⁶ The CPA administrators who had taken up posts in the provinces that autumn therefore had to alter their plans and accelerate the transfer of authority.⁸⁷

The new Iraq policy was in fact an accelerated exit strategy or, as the director of operations at the CPA dubbed it, “a rather sophisticated evacuation plan”. The emphasis was clearly on the time schedule and not on actual results. In addition to Security Sector Reform (preparing the Iraqi security organisations to function without international assistance), the strategy was based on two pillars: a large injection of finance, which also temporarily freed up many millions of US dollars for projects by the Dutch military in Al Muthanna; and ‘refreshment’ of the provincial level of the administrative structures that had largely been set up in the previous year.⁸⁸ It was no coincidence that the order from Baghdad – “to revalidate the provincial councils and have them revalidate the governors” by means of a caucus election procedure – was similar to the model already used in Al Muthanna. Bremer had been informed of and impressed by the reforms in the ‘Dutch’ province. As an alternative to direct elections, the Muthanna model, born out of restrictions which he himself had imposed, now proved handy when speed was of the essence. Each province had to install a Governate Council by 15 January 2004, which in turn had to elect a new governor or revalidate the incumbent one by 15 February.⁸⁹ The eighteen new councils would then select a representative for the national interim parliament on 31 May 2004 and the new national interim government would take office one month later.⁹⁰

As an ‘exemplary’ province, Al Muthanna did not need to conduct a refreshment procedure. The downside of this success was the low priority the province enjoyed in the allocation of personnel. In December, the CPA turned out to have redirected previously promised additional staff to other provinces. The arrival at the start of November of the new provincial coordinator Soriano had been a blessing in the eyes of Swijgman and Rentenaar, but the provincial CPA as a whole continued to perform poorly due to a lack of staff. Dutch military personnel managed almost all (re) construction projects which really ought to have been handled by the CPA.

While in the rest of Iraq a start was made on setting up provincial Governate Councils, Soriano and Rentenaar continued to implement the model for setting up local government in Al Muthanna in December and January. In addition to a functioning Governate Council and the three existing town councils (*qada* councils) in the ‘large’ towns, they also created a fourth town council in December in the desert settlement of As Salman – “a robbers’ den”, according to Swijgman. After that, indirect caucus procedures followed for the seven municipalities (*nahias*). Since the creation of the councils in As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah and the improved procedure in Al Khidr, the formula had been refined, mainly

by a phased procedure for producing the crucial representative electoral group of one hundred people. Yet in the municipalities, which were in fact villages, procedures were not always executed smoothly. In Ad Daraji, the former chair of the old self-appointed village council caused uproar at the election meeting by demanding a place on the list of candidates for himself for the agriculture portfolio, even though he did not meet the educational requirements. After some haggling, the CPA adjusted the condition downwards. The former chair's lack of popularity clearly showed when he did not receive a single vote. After losing, he went out onto the street to stir up a crowd, but failed to get any reaction.⁹¹

On a sunny winter's day in the village of El Sweir, the caucus members (10 per cent of whom were women) took their places at slightly cramped school desks in a local schoolyard, which led to some hilarity. There was also some excitement when a losing candidate shouted that he had been cheated as everyone had promised to vote for him. The fact that villagers immediately took it upon themselves to explain to him that that was not the way democracy worked gave political adviser Rentenaar a great deal of satisfaction. In the ultra-conservative desert village of Al Bussayah the elections were dependent on the deployment of the Chinook helicopters of 2 NLBG due to the great distances involved. The ballots took place in a walled square on sandy ground. A large number of children sat on a bullet hole-riddled wall and cheered like football fans at every ballot.

As Al Bussayah was the only village in the province inhabited by both Shiites and Sunnis, 2 NLBG took the possibility of sectarian troubles into account. As a result of extensive dialogue with the village leaders and proportional representation in the council, these fears did not materialise. The municipal council was formed by three Shiites and four Sunnis. One surprise was the vote for Saddam Hussein cast by one of the caucus members. "We laughed about it and said that it was probably the first election Saddam Hussein had ever lost," Rentenaar reported. In the strictly religious village, twelve women participated. They initially seemed rather scared of coming to the ballot box during the first round of votes. Later, however, the fully-veiled ladies walked "with proud, firm steps". In the village of An Nedjmeh, a woman even won a position in the municipal council "with a big grin on her veiled face". She was way ahead of the seven male candidates. "She [was] the first woman to be elected by a mixed electorate to a council in Al Muthanna," the Dutch political adviser wrote to his superiors.

On 11 January 2004, Rentenaar's last working day in Al Muthanna, the final caucus election at municipal level was held in the village of

Hillal near Ar Rumaythah. One remarkable aspect was the somewhat long, but well-constructed speeches by the candidates. It was suspected that the presence of Samawah tv, which had covered a large number of the elections over the past few months, had something to do with this. Rentenaar gave a final interview for the local station, in which he noted that every town and village now had its own elected council. "The job was not yet done, however," he reported to The Hague. "The centrifugal forces of a country which is about to regain its own sovereignty will continue to cause problems. What has become known here as the Al Muthanna model will undoubtedly have to be adjusted from time to time."⁹²

Rentenaar, who had combined his role as adviser to the NLBG with the crucial executive function for the CPA, was succeeded by two officials. Robbert van Lanschot, a colleague from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took over the first role affiliated to NLBG. A US diplomat would take up his CPA role. The departing first political adviser predicted in his final report to the Netherlands that his two successors would have their hands full with politico-administrative developments. The changing of the guard brought an end to the key role played by the Dutch diplomat as linchpin between the military forces, the occupying authorities and the Iraqis.

The Al Muthanna model as an exit strategy

The relevance of the administrative model created by the Dutch in Al Muthanna to the accelerated transfer of sovereignty temporarily placed the spotlight on the remote province for a while. For instance, British Major General Lamb visited the elections in Al Majed and the ones held in Al Bussayah were broadcast by Basrah tv throughout Southern Iraq. In December 2003, the Al Muthanna model received modest international media attention for the first time, by the US *Christian Science Monitor* and *The Lebanon Post*. While all worldwide media coverage on Iraq centred on the arrest on 13 December of former dictator Saddam Hussein, the first genuine success story according to experienced Middle East correspondent Nicholas Blanford was happening in Al Muthanna. Blanford, an acquaintance of Rentenaar from his time in Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories, did, at the latter's request, not mention the central role played by the Dutch diplomat. The Al Muthanna-style administrative model was not reported in the Dutch press. In Letters to Parliament and reports by the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, the administrative build-up was described as highly successful, and for political purposes

still consistently presented as a CPA achievement. Even the regional CPA coordinator, Hilary Synnott, would later incorrectly ascribe the election model to Jim Soriano.⁹³

Governorate Coordinator Soriano himself openly ascribed all the honour to Rentenaar, however. The Dutch political adviser “took ownership of the caucus system” and according to the American was the “chief architect” of the model. He was the most important adviser to the local councils. “He believed in his work. And he brought the Iraqi citizens into believing in it with him.”⁹⁴ In stressing Rentenaar’s role, Soriano may also unwittingly have touched on the weakness of the Al Muthanna model. The improvised process rested chiefly on individual initiative and personal contacts, which had been made possible by Rentenaar’s linguistic and cultural knowledge and relatively long posting. As the CPA remained chaotic both in Baghdad and at the provincial level, Rentenaar, as well as the important RTI adviser Alistair Blunt, having spent seven months in their posts, were viewed as essential constant factors. Through almost continuous consultation with the local parties, they were able to put out brushfires which could otherwise have developed into major crises. An eighteen-year-old Marine understood this perfectly when he said to Rentenaar: “Sir, if you do your best, I don’t have to wear my helmet.”⁹⁵

But was Al Muthanna a suitable model for the rest of Iraq? More important to the CPA in Baghdad than an answer to that question were the simplicity and speed of the procedure. After several months of reforms under pressure from a tight schedule, in the spring of 2004 none of the other Governate Councils was like the one in Al Muthanna. Sloppy selection mechanisms and hasty implementation had often resulted in the councils being viewed as illegitimate by the local population. According to Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani – and many Shiites agreed with him – the only panacea for a stable Iraq was direct elections.⁹⁶ Anything else was merely a stopgap.

Even the administrative system in Al Muthanna came under pressure in early 2004 – not long after Rentenaar’s departure. The CPA announced that the occupation’s model province did not need to undergo refreshment. Yet in both As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah there was increasing pressure to refresh the two town councils, which had been created in the summer of 2003 using rapid procedures under US authority. The people of Al Muthanna were clearly dissatisfied with their democratic quality. Once Soriano had agreed to ‘refined’ caucus procedures in order to meet these demands, the political parties availed themselves of the opportunity to reject the electoral system as a whole. With a great deal of political theatre

and drama, they entered into discussions with the CPA administrator. They thus displayed much more assertiveness than six months earlier and made clear that their priorities were very different from those of the CPA.

The departure of the experienced 'brushfire fighters' Rentenaar and Blunt undoubtedly played a role in this squabbling. Yet the tide was turned mainly by the prospect of genuine power, triggered by the accelerated end to the occupation in June 2004, as well as the growing self-confidence of the Shiite parties. According to Mark Etherington, CPA coordinator in Al Kut, the agreement on the accelerated transfer of sovereignty undermined the legitimacy of the fragile new councils. The sudden announcement that a new Iraqi government would take up office in the summer of 2004 intensified the power struggle. There was no longer any motivation for the factions to obey the laws and rules of the CPA now that it would not be around for much longer.⁹⁷ The state of affairs in the largest towns in Al Muthanna was illustrative of the political awakening among Shiites. Ultimately, Soriano therefore agreed to hold fresh, even more extensive caucus procedures and elections, which would be held in As Samawah in April and in Ar Rumaythah in May.

The key question was whether the growing power struggle would lead to more violence. During a visit to As Samawah at the end of December 2003, Sayyed Aamer Al Hakim, nephew of the SCIRI leader murdered the previous August, pointedly referred to the major role the Shiite leadership was playing in Iraq in preventing acts of resistance against the Coalition. He visited Al Muthanna on behalf of his father, Abdul Aziz Al Hakim, the new SCIRI leader and temporary chair of the Iraqi Governing Council in Baghdad. Aamer Al Hakim praised the administrative reforms in the model province at length, but claimed that Coalition troops did not realise sufficiently well that if the Shiites did not "obtain their full rights" in Iraq, their leadership might well make less effort to preserve the peace. In a friendly but gently threatening speech, he reminded his audience that the 1920 uprising against the previous British occupation had started in Al Muthanna, in fact in Ar Rumaythah.⁹⁸ The tone was set for 2004.

4

Creating a secure environment

A disorderly bunch

Serious rioting broke out in Al Muthanna a couple of weeks after the change of command from 1 NLBG to 2 NLBG. Dissatisfied citizens congregated near government buildings to protest about unemployment, fuel shortages and frequent power cuts. One demonstration on 8 December 2003 in Ar Rumaythah escalated when an angry crowd of several hundred people besieged the police station. The tough response from local cops and their arrest of a few key persons antagonised the demonstrators. Unintimidated by multiple warning shots, the protestors drove the police back into the building under a hail of stones. The Dutch Marines of 21 Infantry Company, responsible for security in the town, intervened to rein in both the crowd and the police. They placed a cordon around the complex and locked the police in. In doing so, they took the sting out of the confrontation for the time being.

The incident temporarily affected the relationship between 21 Infantry Company and the Ar Rumaythah police department. The Dutch thought that the Iraqi police had acted too provocatively by firing indiscriminately into the air and beating protestors. Moreover, the Marines thought the police were generally “a disorderly bunch” and suspected them of criminal activities including looting and dealing in abandoned vehicles. For their part, the Iraqi police forces believed that the Dutch had undermined their credibility by intervening.¹ The Dutch were also criticised by the town’s

security committee. The NLBG was blamed for failing to create a sufficiently secure environment near the highway, where the number of carjackings was high, especially at night.²

The unrest was not confined to the town of Ar Rumaythah. The next day, demonstrations also got out of hand outside the CPA building in As Samawah. Peaceful demonstrations had previously been held here, but this time the crowd was extremely aggressive. Close to the CPA complex, about three hundred young men blocked the route of a US convoy and pelted the army trucks with stones. The convoy security guards panicked and fired rifle rounds over the heads of the crowd. Unimpressed, the rioters attempted to loot a number of civilian trucks in the convoy. It was obvious that a handful of protestors was playing a crucial role in egging on the crowd. The Iraqi police did nothing. A rifle section of Dutch Marines which was guarding the CPA building therefore intervened. When the Dutch Quick Reaction Force arrived, it too was pelted with stones. Using batons, the Marines managed to force a path through and drive back the crowd. The previously passive police eventually also lent a hand and the situation was brought under control.

This incident again made it painfully clear that public order and security, economic and social problems and the legitimacy of government were inextricably bound up with one another. In As Samawah, the immediate cause of the riots was the temporary suspension of the CPA's mismanaged job creation scheme. The people wanted jobs and progress and had pinned their hopes on the occupation service, which continued to function poorly with too few personnel. This temporarily rocked the social order in parts of the 'Dutch' province. It took less and less to spark an incident. The disappointing performance of the Iraqi security forces remained a matter for concern.

The Dutch battle group's operations underwent a shift around this time. The new priority was the build-up of Iraqi security organisations, which had been functioning poorly until then. The NLBG set to work selecting, training, monitoring and mentoring Iraqi security personnel, now that there was a date for the Iraqis to take on these tasks independently and June 2004 was fast approaching. The number of trained security troops was given an increasingly prominent role in Coalition statistics which, in defiance of the growing violence and criticism of the occupation, were aimed at demonstrating that there was indeed progress.³ Yet how effective was the build-up of the new Iraqi security sector? Was the objective to have Iraq stand on its own two feet in the summer of 2004 realistic, and

were Coalition intentions therefore more than just a numbers game? And with a focus on the Dutch: was ‘their’ relatively peaceful province ready for the intended substantial troop reductions when the year of occupation ended?⁴

Security Sector Reform

In its pre-war planning, the Coalition assumed a stable environment in which Iraqi police would remain at their posts and be able to maintain law and order. Until the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, the Americans and British had basically rejected the idea of a policing task for their own troops.⁵ The total anarchy which followed the fall of the Baath regime demonstrated the naivety of this assumption. In the spring and summer of 2003, us and British troops were therefore unprepared as they hastily started training large numbers of new Iraqi security personnel. The Coalition used the term ‘Security Sector Reform (SSR)’ for all these tasks, although in Iraq it was not so much about reforming as about *rebuilding* the police, army, legal system and prison service.

Over the preceding decade the Dutch armed forces had gained substantial experience of SSR during peace support operations. In Namibia in 1989, Cambodia in 1992-1993 and Bosnia from 1995 onwards it had generally been recognised that in addition to military peacekeepers the deployment of a civilian police force could be decisive to the mission’s success in the long term. In particular during the UN-mandated *de facto* occupations of Kosovo (including a Dutch contribution) and East Timor (without a Dutch contribution), relevant lessons had been learned. Anarchy and widespread looting, an international civil police force which was slow to deploy, military personnel unready and unwilling to maintain law and order, a failing judicial system – in this respect the situation in Iraq in 2003 was nothing new.⁶

Within the SSR efforts as a whole, the build-up of the Iraqi police force was the Coalition’s initial priority. In contrast to the recently-disbanded secret police and security forces, the majority of the regular police – who under Saddam Hussein had been involved in little more than dealing with traffic offences and petty crime – had no Baath party affiliation. The force was therefore allowed to continue to exist after the invasion. However, the organisation lacked self-confidence and leadership. Some of the officers and most senior civil servants at the Ministry of the Interior had been members of the Baath party and had therefore fled abroad or

been dismissed by the Coalition. In a centralistic society with a military-hierarchical police force such as existed in Iraq, this resulted in a largely apathetic service.⁷

For 2/5 Marines and the NLBG in Al Muthanna in the summer of 2003 it was a challenge to get the cops to do their jobs. “The police had to leave their hide-outs,” as Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman phrased it, “but they were scared.” Or they were drunk, as alcohol abuse was a major problem. The population had little faith in the force, which they associated with the former regime.⁸ Pragmatic considerations by military interim administrators often meant that key figures with a Baath history sometimes remained in their jobs. This was the case with the provincial commander in Al Muthanna, Colonel Faddil. When governor Al Hassani dismissed him in December 2003, his successor Lieutenant Colonel Kareem also turned out to be a former Baath party member.

In spite of the emphasis on police reforms and security sector development, the resources made available by Washington and London for this purpose in 2003 were limited. SSR funds were negligible in comparison to the astronomical cost of the military deployment as a whole. The management and implementation of the police programme was improvised and problematic. At the provincial level, there were very few civilian trainers or coaches – often retired police officers – and military personnel and MP units themselves mostly took on the recruitment, training and mentoring of the Iraqi police forces. Coalition personnel also dealt with the purchase and delivery of material and with the building and improvement of infrastructure.

In Al Muthanna, 2/5 Marines and its supporting MP company had raced about 800 police officers through a five-day training programme. From August 2003 onwards, with far fewer personnel, the Dutch MP platoon initiated a programme of training, mentoring and monitoring this police force. The ‘green MPs’ provided a basic training course for new personnel, conducted follow-up courses for existing forces and worked together with the Iraqis on patrols and office tasks. The basic course taught Iraqi police apprehension and investigation skills, and how to register a crime report using the Dutch method. The latter was sorely needed according to the chief public prosecutor in As Samawah, Abid Al Khidar. He regularly had to release suspects due to the many procedural errors in the investigation.⁹

There was another cause for the low occupancy rate of As Samawah police station cells, however. As one prisoner explained, “those with money can buy their way out, those without money are stuck here”. According to

Major Mischa Geeratz, the teaching of legal values and standards needed to be a priority in the training course.¹⁰ The legal adviser of 1 NLBG reported that the police were corrupt, incompetent and prejudiced. The Iraqi cops also paid little attention to human rights. The use of force in interrogations in order to obtain specific confessions proved to be a major problem. The basic training course therefore included a lesson about ethics, with the worthy aim of discouraging such practices.¹¹

At the start of the Dutch operation 1,050 police were employed, including about 100 officers. In two months, the Dutch MPS trained an additional 200 newcomers, which meant that numbers were back to pre-war levels by October 2003. With respect to materials and accommodation, however, the Al Muthanna police were in very poor shape. As Samawah was home to the provincial headquarters, seven local stations and one prison. The buildings and cells were in extremely poor condition, as was the furniture. There were few computers and there was no archive storage capacity. The situation was even worse in Ar Rumaythah, Al Khidr and the outlying areas.¹² In October, at the instigation of the NLBG the Netherlands therefore donated nearly 900,000 euros for purchasing materials.¹³ Most of this money was spent on a project to link the various security services to a Motorola communications network. The Dutch also purchased computers, furniture, uniforms, bullet-proof vests, vehicles and pistols.¹⁴

The task of the Al Muthanna police was easier to carry out than in the more rebellious areas of Iraq, where Coalition troops often deployed the local police as auxiliary troops in combat operations. In cities such as Baghdad and Basra, police stations and individual police were regularly the target of attacks and they hardly had time for public order tasks. In spite of the relatively favourable security conditions, the NLBG nevertheless experienced plenty of complications in building and reforming the police force in Al Muthanna. The Dutch in particular considered tribal ties to have a paralysing effect. There was always a risk of reprisals against police, their families or their tribe. It was also almost impossible for a policeman to arrest a suspect from his own tribe. No-one wanted to invoke the worst-case scenario of a vendetta. This was one reason why the police forces appreciated the presence of the Dutch Marines or MP personnel during detention operations. They could then always blame the foreigners for the house search or arrest.¹⁵

Dutch priorities in building up the police force did not always correspond with those of the Iraqi leaders. Governor Al Hassani and interim police chief Kareem constantly pressed for more personnel and

heavier weapons, while the Dutch insisted on more training and more effective deployment. The wishes of the police commissioner were mainly derived from fears of being attacked by militias or criminal gangs, which possessed impressive weapons arsenals comprising rifles, RPGs and mortars. The governor requested more personnel because he wanted to provide his party and tribe members with jobs. By including his own people in the force he also increased the loyalty of the police to him personally.¹⁶ Job creation was a major motive in demanding the expansion of the other security services too. This was particularly true of the FPS, the hotchpotch of security officials set up shortly after the Coalition's invasion to prevent further looting of government facilities and industrial and economic infrastructure. The wages of the 1,000-plus FPS guards in Al Muthanna were paid out of the Coalition's CERP fund, which in fact made it a job creation scheme.¹⁷ Many armed FPS guards had dual roles and also hired themselves out as foot soldiers to parties and tribes.

The international SSR effort comprised building up the traditional 'triangle' of a police force, legal system and prison system. 2/5 Marines spent 90,000 US dollars on rebuilding three law courts. The Government Support Team of 1 NLBG conducted a follow-up project worth 130,000 US dollars.¹⁸ In addition to this civil component of the SSR programme, there were the military and paramilitary components, which devoured an increasing proportion of NLBG's money and training capacity. The new Iraqi army was to take on the task of defending Iraqi territory, but for the time being the priority was domestic security.¹⁹ There were no active army units in Al Muthanna. In mid-July 2003, the Coalition decided to set up the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the paramilitary organisation which could support both the local police and international troops in maintaining internal order and security. The violent resistance and advent of heavily-armed criminal organisations meant that Coalition troops had a growing need for this type of robust Iraqi auxiliary force. The occupiers also believed it was important for everyday security operations to have an 'Iraqi face'.²⁰ Formally, the Civil Defence Corps came under the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior, but recruitment, training and deployment were led by Coalition forces. Finance came from CERP funds, which meant that military commanders had direct control.²¹

The Coalition aimed to set up at least one Iraqi Civil Defence Corps battalion per province. The calm conditions in Al Muthanna meant that 1 NLBG was initially ordered to create only a company-sized unit. In December 2003, 2 NLBG expanded this to a battalion, although at 500 strong this unit

was substantially smaller than the usual size of about 850.²² The Iraqis were largely trained on the job. They were deployed almost immediately under the command of Dutch Marines for patrols and manning checkpoints. They also supported the police, the FPS and the border police.²³ The Civil Defence Corps carried light weapons and its members' level of expertise varied greatly. The auxiliary troops were appreciated by the locals in Al Muthanna.²⁴ This did not alter the fact, however, that the Dutch regularly caught them looting vehicles and committing other crimes. The Marines were forced to continue monitoring the organisation closely.²⁵

The transition plan

Motivated by the desire to drastically reduce the number of troops in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, the Coalition started working on a transition plan for security tasks in October 2003.²⁶ The agreement with the Iraqi Governing Council of 15 November 2003 on the 2004 transfer of sovereignty led to things shifting up a gear. The Coalition did not just step up the training of security personnel; the institutional build-up and reforms within ministries and police academies were also given greater attention. The aim was to achieve self-government and Iraqi responsibility for maintaining public order by the end of June 2004.²⁷

The SSR plan had three phases: local control, regional control and strategic overwatch. In the first phase, the Iraqi security forces continued to operate under the direct control of Coalition troops. At this stage, international forces were merely to fulfil a QRF role while retaining responsibility for the outlying areas. The second phase, regional control, entailed the local security bodies being able to operate sufficiently effectively to be able to maintain law and order under the responsibility of the new local government. The international troops would then no longer lead but act as advisers or – in emergencies – operate independently at the request of the Iraqi provincial governments. The aim was to reach this phase before the transfer of sovereignty at the end of June 2004.²⁸ The phase of strategic overwatch meant that the Iraqis could guarantee their own internal security and that the security bodies could operate in an integrated manner. The foreign troops would then carry out only the defence of the national borders.

The three phases overlapped. This certainly had advantages when it came to applying deadlines, because the latest date the Coalition had set itself for local control proved to be over-ambitious. The original date

of 1 March 2004 was quickly changed to 1 April.²⁹ In fact, this phase was only achieved within MND South-East at the end of April. British divisional commander Lamb embraced the motto: “We have to do things Iraqi style, which means that adequate is good enough.” He was clearly inspired by T.E. Lawrence, the famous British army officer and writer who fought alongside Arab rebels against Ottoman rule during the First World War. “Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them,” ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ wrote in his famous ‘Twenty-Seven Articles’, a summary of all the lessons he had learned as a military adviser in the Middle East. His words were taken as gospel among military forces and CPA personnel in Iraq.³⁰

Major General Andrew Stewart succeeded Lamb as divisional commander on 28 December 2003 and formally made SSR the chief task of MND South-East. The general described the end objective of the programme as: “a secure and stable environment maintained by credible, self confident and capable security structures under Iraqi governance”.³¹ The shift of emphasis within the multinational division required some adjustments. To this end, in December a 14-strong SSR cell was set up in Basra. The headquarters also reorganised the five battle groups of the British brigade so that one could be completely freed up for training, mentoring and monitoring the Iraqis. The UK, Canada, Australia and Spain would provide senior police officers to support, coach and monitor provincial police chiefs. From April 2004, the Netherlands joined this initiative and deployed Marechaussee Colonel Robert Veltman as CPA police mentor alongside Al Muthanna police chief Kareem.

The British also initiated a number of new projects, including training a Police Support Unit (PSU). This unit was to be trained for tougher police tasks and specialist duties such as crowd and riot control (CRC) and complex arrest operations. Divisional headquarters also took the initiative to create Provincial Joint Coordination Centers (PJCCs). In early December 2003, the Dutch battle group set up the PJCC for Al Muthanna, which acted as a command post for directing the various security bodies, the fire brigade and ambulance service in the event of emergencies. In the long term, the PJCC would be placed under the control of the Provincial Security Committee. The NLBG provided fifteen military personnel to assist Iraqi personnel at the emergency command centre.³²

2 NLBG followed suit and reorganised itself so as to be able to carry out the adjusted assignment. Under its predecessors, responsibility for SSR had been spread across the MP platoon, the infantry companies and

the Government Support Team. Now the Dutch concentrated this task in the Operations staff section (s3). Several military forces were given a dual role.³³ The anti-tank platoon took on the full-time task of training new personnel for the border police. The battle group initiated the required SSR projects, some of which were financed by the Netherlands. Apart from the abovementioned purchase of police equipment, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs put half a million euros into an independent communications network for the PJCC and contributed financially to the construction of the regional police academy in As Zubayah. The Netherlands also paid for the rebuilding of the provincial prison and the NLBG began the construction of three small barracks for the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps.

Reorganisation and improvisation were insufficient to cope with the extreme demand for SSR, however. The battle group had long pressed The Hague for additional personnel to implement its new main task. On 13 February 2004, the Dutch government agreed to expand the NLBG by 108 troops. In addition to replacements for the commandos who had been training the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the additional personnel comprised sixteen instructors for the Iraqi police, twelve instructors for the border police, seven CRC instructors for the Police Support Unit and six instructors for the police academy in As Zubayah. The Dutch armed forces also provided six additional officials for the PJCC and ten for the permanent support of the Civil Defence Corps battalion staff. For crowd and riot control, the Royal Netherlands Army sent a specially trained 37-strong CRC platoon to Iraq from February to June 2004.³⁴

The specialist CRC platoon was not specifically on the battle group's wish-list. The Marines thought that they could conduct this task very well with their current capacity, but the Ministry of Defence was less than enthusiastic about the Marines having to do crowd and riot control in Iraq. Nevertheless, the CRC-trained artillery platoon left Iraq four months later without having been deployed to conduct its specific task. Instead, the gunners spent their days doing guard duty. Demonstrations, riots and looting *did* continue, but 2 NLBG (and subsequently 3 NLBG) refrained from using the CRC unit to counter these. According to the staff of 2 NLBG, the nature of the minor uprisings did not lend itself to the deployment of the platoon due to its relatively long reaction time. The riots were usually small-scale, occurred throughout the sizeable operational area, flared up quickly and died down again in no time. Use of the special CRC platoon was also not encouraged by battalion commanders. They envisaged a very different solution whereby the emphasis was on 'fire prevention' rather than 'putting out fires'.³⁵

In the meantime, the security situation was a rather mixed picture. “Calm” was the most common description in the daily reports. Yet things went badly wrong in As Samawah on 3 January. Just as in early December, the CPA employment programme triggered severe rioting. The programme’s planning and information provision was still very poor, and so a crowd of about a thousand job-seekers congregated on a square, a few hundred metres from the CPA building, without anyone being prepared. Tensions quickly rose. The crowd looted a government building, and when troublemakers also started to throw stones at a neighbouring building belonging to a political party shots were suddenly fired. One person was killed and several injured.³⁶ The Quick Reaction Force of 2 NLBG, which had arrived at the square along with several MPS, was verbally abused and pelted with stones. The Dutch had to fire several warning shots to keep the angry crowd in check.³⁷ Only after urging by the NLBG did the Iraqi police intervene, enter the building from which the shots had been fired and apprehend the suspects. The result of the chaos: 2 dead, 5 wounded and 62 arrests.³⁸

As political adviser Rentenaar said one week prior to his departure, these events were a sign that “the praised stability in Al Muthanna” was fragile indeed. That same day, Marines fired warning shots to drive away about one hundred looters from two stranded US Army trucks, and men bearing RPGs were seen on the streets of As Samawah that evening.³⁹ A few weeks later, the province was confronted for the first time with the phenomenon of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), the roadside bombs which had become a veritable plague in other parts of Iraq and caused many deaths in Coalition ranks. Explosive ordnance personnel defused one IED on 24 January; another exploded early without causing any damage.⁴⁰ Two weeks later, early in the morning, two explosions occurred close to the main police station in the centre of As Samawah. The QRF discovered an improvised launching device for seven rockets with an alarm clock and batteries as a detonator. Two rockets were missing from the launch tubes. It never became clear whether the police station or the CPA compound had been the target, but the perpetrators were very likely from the Al Zuwaïd clan, intelligence sources reported.⁴¹

In between such incidents many things were still going well, as could be seen from the governor’s announcement that, in addition to a ring road around As Samawah, a connecting motorway was to be built between the highways known as Jackson and Tampa. The construction of a new power station had also been started. The NLBG put a great deal of effort into these

projects. Further good news was that the Japanese government had decided to send a 600-strong humanitarian support battalion to Al Muthanna following lengthy political consultations and a constitutional amendment. Until then, the pacifist Japanese constitution had prohibited deployment of the Japanese Self-Defense Force to an overseas war zone. The Japanese unit was to perform tasks such as water purification, improving medical care and renovating and constructing public buildings. The first personnel arrived on 20 January, accompanied by a large contingent of journalists and television crews.⁴² Clearly lured by the supposed calm in this specific area of deployment, the Japanese armed forces thus initiated their first non-UN overseas mission since the Second World War.

Troops in contact

Ever more often, Dutch military personnel used their weapons that winter. From December 2003, apart from warning shots fired during riots in the towns, more and more shooting incidents occurred due to crime along the main roads and highways. Carjackings posed a constant threat to Iraqis and had caused the Dutch a great deal of work since the start of the mission in August 2003. The looting of stranded us vehicles along the Main Supply Routes had also been a problem for months. Two factors led to the convoy problems taking a new turn from December. Firstly, the us initiated the rotation of 250,000 of its military personnel, the largest war-time troop replacement in their armed forces since the Second World War. This was due to last until April 2004.⁴³

Secondly, heavy rainfall transformed fifty kilometres of Route Tampa's dirt road into a quagmire. This meant that all the convoys heading north, often comprising hundreds of vehicles, had to take the alternative Route Jackson, which ran right through the town of As Samawah. The heavy rainfall and increased traffic on the main roads also often led to trucks breaking down, which meant that the Dutch Marines increasingly had to mobilise to save what they could. The surrounding muddy terrain imposed an additional complication, as broken-down trucks, which thieves had previously towed into the desert to strip at their leisure, under the current chaotic conditions were looted right at the side of the road.⁴⁴

In the course of autumn 2003, this spontaneous looting became organised robbery by criminals who were sometimes also armed. us MPS were initially responsible for accompanying the convoys, but their restricted numbers were further being reduced. At the same time, the

blunt behaviour of us convoy guards deteriorated further with the arrival of inexperienced, and therefore nervous, new personnel. One day, Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar was driving behind a us-guarded fuel convoy in As Samawah and witnessed for himself how some Americans behaved towards the local population.

“A rifle butt was used several times to hit Iraqi cars to make way for the convoy and create room for manoeuvre for the us military personnel. This unnecessary action set me thinking. I continued driving northwards behind a civilian vehicle on MSR Jackson towards Ar Rumaythah. Suddenly I was overtaken by a us HMMWV [army vehicle] which tried to force the civilian vehicle from the road and even visibly (directly) threatened the Iraqi using a pistol. I personally intervened and told the American in question that he was totally out of order. Intolerable behaviour! These Americans have a serious attitude problem.”⁴⁵

us convoy security guards treated Iraqis roughly and had a low threshold when it came to using force, but the Dutch units also occasionally used their weapons in such circumstances. On 2 December, Marines fired warning shots using .50 machine guns to disperse a group of several hundred looters from a stranded tractor-trailer combination. The Americans had set the vehicle alight and abandoned it. The container had been forced open and most of the contents had been removed.⁴⁶ Setting light to trucks and their loads to prevent theft was a frequent occurrence and had a very negative effect. The Americans gradually ceased to do this, but only following urging by the Dutch battle group and the British divisional commanders, who believed that Coalition vehicles and goods ought to be recovered wherever possible, not destroyed. The NLBG used engineers under the protection of the QRF to recover trucks, containers, prefabs and other loads.

The immediate threat on the roads increased not just for Iraqi travellers and us convoys. The Dutch were also running ever-greater risks themselves. On 7 December 2003, a patrol conducted by 23 Infantry Company in four Land Rovers came under fire from unknown attackers on Route Jackson between As Samawah and Al Khidr. The Marines thought they saw muzzle flashes coming from a wrecked car about two hundred metres away. They returned fire and thought they had wounded one of the attackers.⁴⁷ Returning fire fitted in with the British divisional commander's stance in such situations, as was proved when military personnel from his own staff twice came under fire in Basra city. In both cases, there were Dutch personnel

present in the vehicle. The response of the vigorous Scottish general during his daily briefing at headquarters was reportedly “Kill the motherfuckers”.⁴⁸

The Rules of Engagement, however, meant that this encouragement was rather problematic. First, enemy gunmen were difficult to distinguish from ordinary citizens. Secondly, ambushers were not always the enemy as such. A third shooting, which occurred that same day near Al Khidr, shortly after Lamb had expressed himself in such unambiguous terms, illustrated this and was a good example of the complications involved. The QRF of 23 Infantry Company encountered a group of eighty looting Iraqis around a broken-down truck abandoned by a US convoy along Route Jackson. When the crowd ignored the instructions issued by the Marines to disperse, the Dutch fired warning shots. Two answering shots were fired from the crowd. In order to get a better view of the situation, the Marines let off a few flares, but the gunmen could not be identified. Opening fire was not an option.⁴⁹

On 18 January, near the village of Hamza, the difficulties of distinguishing between friend and foe when military troops came under fire were again made clear. That evening, six Marines from 21 Infantry Company, accompanied by an interpreter and seventeen Iraqi policemen, conducted a patrol in an area infamous for its many carjackings and trafficking activities. After a brief pursuit of a suspicious vehicle, the Dutch and Iraqi forces temporarily became separated. During a short stop near a school building, the Marines suddenly came under fire from three sides. They found a number of unarmed civilians in the school. These urged the Marines and those who had fired at them to cease their firing immediately. Fifteen unarmed men then appeared from all directions, presumably having left their arms in the surrounding area. No-one had been hurt.

The civilian militia members had taken the Dutch for carjackers. They apologised and invited the Marines to drink tea with them the following day. Criminals had recently attempted to break into the school and car thieves were very active in this area, according to the locals. Major Olivier Loos, commander of 21 Infantry Company, was worried about the confusion and other such cases of mistaken identity. It was the third occasion within a short space of time on which a patrol from his unit had been fired upon because members of the FPS, ordinary policemen or armed Iraqi civilians had mistaken the Dutch Marines for criminals in the dark. It was perfectly possible for the Dutch to make the same mistake. Light signals were agreed with the security services, but such arrangements were clearly impossible with civilians.⁵⁰

The decision to use force in a given situation was taken by the commanders of the unit on the spot. They based their choice on the 'Aide-mémoire for SFIR commanders', the Dutch instructions on the use of force derived from the Rules of Engagement (ROE) of MND South-East. These were summarised on a pocket-sized soldier's card carried by all military personnel.⁵¹ In drawing up these instructions, the Dutch aimed to grant flexible authority for both self-protection and conducting operations.⁵² Like the British, they applied the principle that military personnel should use no more force than was strictly necessary (proportionality). It was up to the commander to decide whether this meant firing six hundred shots as on 9 December, the twenty rounds fired to provide cover on 18 January, just a few warning shots or no force at all – as was most often the case. Individual servicemen of course made their own assessment of the situation in the thick of the action. Decisions were assessed in retrospect when reported. In the event of a suspected breach the 'blue MPS' were called in, but not all shooting incidents needed to be reported.⁵³

If Dutch forces came under fire, the decision to return fire usually involved split-second decision-making under pressure. But what if apparently innocent civilians were involved, who might well pose a threat to the Coalition troops, other persons or material? This was the main issue on 27 December 2003, when a Dutch Sergeant Major fired a warning shot in order to secure supplies in a shipping container left behind on the side of the road by a US convoy travelling through Al Muthanna. The second shot, which the Sergeant Major said he had aimed at the ground, apparently ricocheted and wounded a person at approximately eighty metres from where the Marines were standing. The Iraqi man had been part of a group that was approaching the location with the intention of looting the container. The victim collapsed and died soon thereafter.⁵⁴

The Sergeant Major was apprehended by MP personnel, removed from Iraq and prosecuted in the Netherlands by the Dutch Public Prosecution Service (OM) on suspicion of breaching the instructions on the use of force by, as the Public Prosecutor put it, firing unnecessary warning shots which led to the death of the Iraqi. The case became a matter of prestige and caused a big stir in Dutch society and in the armed forces. The so-called 'Eric O. case' dealt with the nature of the Dutch SFIR operation, the operational circumstances in which Dutch troops were doing their jobs in Iraq, and which rules did or did not apply. The chairman of the Board of Prosecutors General defended prosecuting the Sergeant Major on television by comparing the Marine's work to that of a police officer on the beat in the Netherlands.⁵⁵

The incident caused uproar in political circles in The Hague and in the Dutch media in relation to the instructions on the use of force for the NLBG. It was claimed they were unclear. A leaked letter from the Public Prosecutor dated 15 January 2004 gave the impression that Dutch military personnel were not allowed to use force, even to fire warning shots.⁵⁶ This appeared to contradict statements by Minister of Defence Henk Kamp that “robust” force might be used where necessary. Members of Parliament from across the political spectrum tried to outdo each other in demanding explanations and focused their criticism mainly on the Public Prosecution Service. According to one Member of Parliament, it was as if the chairman of the Board of Prosecutors thought that Dutch military forces were “holidaying in Benidorm”.⁵⁷ The Prosecution Service stressed in retrospect that the letter specifically referred to the incident on 27 December 2003, during which Sergeant Major O. allegedly should have refrained from firing any warning shots, either into the air or at the ground, as the situation was not sufficiently threatening to warrant his decision.

In response to the uproar, Minister Kamp informed the Dutch Parliament that he considered the instructions on the use of force to be satisfactory. Senior military personnel in Iraq agreed with him that the ROES offered “generous” scope for the use of force.⁵⁸ The confusion proved mainly to be in the Netherlands and not only related to the ROE, but also to the nature of the mission as a whole. For instance, the Public Prosecution Service emphasised that the Netherlands was not an occupying power in Iraq, which meant that in its opinion the Dutch instructions on the use of force should contain more restrictions than the British ROE.⁵⁹ In saying so, the Board of Prosecutors echoed the lack of clarity that had developed in the Netherlands on the nature of the SFIR operation. After all, the government portrayed the mission as different and separate from that of the occupying powers and even from the Coalition effort in general.

Yet did the Dutch in Iraq have such a different assignment from the British, under whose command they were serving? Not really, at least not when it came to the use of force. The national caveats, which excluded executive police tasks and governmental tasks for Dutch military personnel, created the impression of different powers and a different set of tasks, but these caveats (unworkable in practice) had no influence on the instructions relevant to this case. Divisional commander Lamb had expressly ordered his troops to act against looters, and Dutch forces in Southern Iraq were generally allowed to act in the same way as their British or other allied colleagues. Moreover, their *modus operandi* was in practice very similar –

partly due to the close ties between the Dutch Marine Corps and the British armed forces.⁶⁰ The task of retrieving Coalition property, such as stranded material along the Main Supply Routes, remained unchanged for the NLBG. “The golden rule,” operations officer Major Peter Hengeveld explained, “is that we do not withdraw. If you do so, it’s game over.” In his opinion, there was no lack of clarity among the soldiers and NCOS. “Until the Iraqis can take over, we are in command here. And this command simply does not tolerate such looting.”⁶¹

The Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and the Netherlands stipulated that the British ROE list was the source document for the Dutch instructions on the use of force. This document permitted all types of warnings (including warning shots) for the protection of Coalition goods. It was up to the judge to decide whether the situation at the retrieval site along Route Jackson on 27 December 2003 warranted the shots fired by Sergeant Major Eric O. and whether the Marine NCO had actually fired his rifle in a safe enough direction. The commotion surrounding the case continued for months, but the court case ended in acquittal on 18 October 2004. The judgment was upheld on appeal six months later.

Knock Talk Search

The commotion caused by the Eric O. case demonstrated that the Netherlands had to come to terms with tougher conditions in crisis response operations. Following participation mainly in peacekeeping operations under the UN flag, since the mid-1990s the Dutch had been primarily deployed on missions with a peace-enforcement mandate in the Balkans (Bosnia and Kosovo), as part of the NATO alliance. After the US forcefully overthrew the regimes in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the Dutch government decided in both cases to contribute to the stabilisation of these countries by joining the specifically created US-led coalitions. However, these missions did not comply with ‘traditional’ patterns. Iraq and Afghanistan were different. Violence against the Coalition and the internal struggle between population groups and factions grew rapidly in both cases, which substantially hindered reconstruction and made ‘peace support’ by definition difficult.

Nevertheless, the rather unrealistic image of the Dutch mission in Iraq as a ‘peace operation’ remained due to the relatively positive developments in Al Muthanna itself. CPA personnel who came to the province from Baghdad and Basra were surprised by the absence of violence and the ease

with which Dutch troops and they themselves were able to go out into the streets and make contact with the locals.⁶² The idea of a specific ‘Dutch approach’ therefore arose. The Dutch troops prided themselves on their open behaviour towards the Iraqis. They preferred not to wear sunglasses or helmets and conducted many patrols on foot and almost exclusively in open vehicles. The Dutch almost always carried their weapons pointing downwards. Respect for the locals, their culture and customs was given high priority. “It’s all about respect,” Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar told British journalist Nicholas Blanford. “If you don’t grab the culture, you won’t grab the problem.”⁶³

This self-image was confirmed by departing divisional commander Lamb, who was full of praise for the Dutch: “My right flank has always been secure thanks to the Dutch Battle Group. The situation in Al Muthanna is down to hard work, professional practice and a light touch.”⁶⁴ Journalist Blanford talked subsequently of a subtle “Dutch touch”, which he contrasted with the often forceful approach of the Americans. What he called the Dutch “‘softly-softly’ approach” was also in stark contrast to the counterinsurgency measures elsewhere. Major General Mieczyslaw Bieniek, the Polish commander of Division Central-South, which was plagued by bomb attacks and operated in the sector north of Al Muthanna, was interested in Dutch experiences for this reason. In February 2004, he paid a visit to As Samawah to see the ‘Dutch approach’ and the ‘Muthanna model’ in practice.⁶⁵

Yet that winter the so-called ‘Dutch approach’, which apparently was a topic of discussion even outside Al Muthanna, was accompanied by a more robust stance. On the one hand, the Dutch Marines had to respond to the growing number of minor disturbances and lootings in their capacity as upholders of law and order. They did so without hesitation. On the other hand, sections of the NLBG increasingly conducted targeting operations, both on their own initiative and on the orders of MND South-East. The term 2 NLBG used for this type of operation was ‘Knock Talk Search’, or KTS operations. The Marines searched homes for prohibited weapons or suspects. Units first surrounded the area. Next, the occupants of the compound were told that they had to leave the building under escort. The Marines subsequently searched it. If they suspected serious opposition, the Dutch would skip the knock on the door and the request for permission to enter and immediately force their way in.⁶⁶ This often entailed breaking down the door. In military jargon, this was known as a ‘hard knock’.

The increase in the number of targeting operations – which went almost unnoticed in the Netherlands – could not be attributed to a

deliberately tougher approach by the Dutch. Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar, a military officer with a law degree, was in fact known within the Marine Corps as the ‘military diplomat’, while his predecessor Swijgman was better known as a more traditional Marine and warrior. Both styles proved their usefulness. The second battle group’s creed was to act respectfully towards the locals, but to use robust action where required.⁶⁷ The Dutch campaign approach therefore remained largely unchanged. The second NLBG was able, however, to operate in an increasingly focused manner thanks to its improved intelligence position.⁶⁸ More and more actionable information led to a growing number of arrests.

One of the first major targeting operations conducted by 2 NLBG at the request of divisional command was Operation White River. On 26 December 2003, 22 Infantry Company cordoned off an area on the river Euphrates thirteen kilometres west of As Samawah. Special Forces from the FLT together with the reconnaissance platoon subsequently entered and searched a number of houses. Intelligence received from MND South-East indicated that this area was a possible gathering place for insurgents. The objective of the operation was described in rather vague terms as “identifying and disrupting anti-Coalition elements”. This referred to a planned arrest that went further than the friendly-sounding ‘Knock Talk Search’. During the operation, the Dutch Marines confiscated fourteen weapons and a substantial amount of ammunition, but could not establish a concrete insurgent connection and therefore made no arrests. They reported afterwards that divisional intelligence on the suspected terror cell was “very thin”.⁶⁹ The locals were surprisingly cooperative. No shots were fired. The fact that one of the properties turned out to be a brothel may have contributed to the mainly positive response from those living nearby.⁷⁰

2 NLBG viewed Operation White River as a good dress rehearsal for subsequent operations.⁷¹ The first followed quickly when a new clean-up of the sheep market in As Samawah proved necessary due to the return of arms traders. Another action was executed a few days later, on 19 January 2004, when 22 Infantry Company together with the FLT conducted a ‘soft-knock’ operation to the south-east of Camp Smitty. Here, the Marines arrested four Iraqis suspected of smuggling arms and drugs from Saudi Arabia. Three of them were suspected of helping the resistance against the Coalition. The next day the NLBG handed them over to the British, who had moved their internment facility from Umm Qasr to Shaibah in December and renamed it the Division Temporary Detainment Facility (DTDF).⁷² In

addition to a sizeable arsenal of arms, the Marines also found night-vision and satellite communications equipment.⁷³

The Dutch military forces also regularly conducted operations on the basis of their own intelligence. The greater part of NLBG's information, an estimated 80 per cent, was gathered using HUMINT.⁷⁴ In addition to active intelligence-gathering by the FLTS and the reconnaissance platoon, the NLBG received information via normal patrols, CIMIC activities and an information hot line. Civilians could anonymously telephone the FLT at the CPA building with information on potential threats or suspect strangers. It only took a truck driver from the rebel stronghold of Fallujah to check into the local hotel and the telephone would start ringing.⁷⁵

Before the NLBG could act on the basis of intelligence, it had to be confirmed by several sources. If the Dutch did act on a false tip-off or, as also happened, simply broke down the wrong door in the heat of the moment, a food parcel was delivered in compensation. Any damage was paid for or repairs were carried out by the NLBG's engineers. According to political adviser Rentenaar, it was this 'Dutch touch' which often made the difference between anger and understanding.⁷⁶ He did gain the impression, however, that the flow of information from the Al Muthanna community decreased as general dissatisfaction with the occupation grew during the winter of 2003-2004. The locals were more inclined to look the other way in the case of suspicious activities and informed the Dutch less frequently of the presence of suspicious strangers.⁷⁷ The feelers put out into the local community by the NLBG had initially been a major success factor, but from early 2004 onwards produced less and less information.

For an arrest operation to be conducted within the Dutch battle group's mandate there had to be an identified threat to the Coalition. Prominent Baath members were by definition targets, and operations to apprehend them fitted the assignment. In the winter of 2003-2004, however, there was a shift from the violent acts perpetrated by these 'Former Regime Elements' to attacks by different types of insurgents, such as religious fundamentalists and nationalists.⁷⁸ Anti Coalition Elements was the new, broader term which the Dutch also started to use to describe these enemies. If such groups posed a threat to the international troops or the CPA, the NLBG was allowed to act.⁷⁹

The rules for detaining suspects remained unchanged: apprehended suspects were handed over to the British if they formed any kind of threat to the Coalition and to the Iraqi police if they were 'normal' criminals. At the same time, there was a definite overlap between insurgent groups and criminal organisations. Organised crime syndicates proved to be assisting

rebels with transport and logistics. The most significant example of this was the infamous Al Zuwaid tribe mentioned earlier, which was concentrated to the north of As Samawah. A sizeable part of this heavily-armed tribe enriched itself by smuggling, carjackings and looting convoys. Indications were rife that the Zuwaidis transported arms and foreign fighters from and to the Sunni rebel groups in Central Iraq.

At the end of January, Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar decided that 2 NLBG's intelligence section possessed enough evidence to prove that the Zuwaid tribe's activities posed a threat to stability and security in Al Muthanna.⁸⁰ The Iraqi police were not informed, as a number of cops had close ties with the tribe. After four days of intensive preparation, the NLBG was ready. In the early morning of 31 January, Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar gave Operation Thunderstruck the green light. The Marines carried out three simultaneous actions at five different locations near As Samawah in order "to neutralise" senior members of the Al Zuwaid tribe and confiscate arms, explosives and ammunition.⁸¹ Afterwards, they searched another two locations. Almost the entire NLBG was involved in the operation in some way. The FLT Special Forces and reconnaissance platoon conducted the main raid against the residence of the prime suspect, Sheikh Klaybich al Zuwaid. Like previous actions, Operation Thunderstruck was classified as a KTS, although it explicitly focused on apprehending suspects and therefore entailed more than just knocking on doors, talking and searching.⁸²

In total, 2 NLBG caught 22 men, including the 'top prize', Sheikh Klaybich. This tribal leader stood accused of numerous crimes and was sought in connection with the As Samawah hospital robbery of August 2003. The Dutch found a total of 25 small arms, a rocket launcher with three anti-tank rockets and five hand grenades. Klaybich and two other chief suspects were taken by helicopter to the MND South-East temporary detention facility in Shaibah that same evening. Two Iraqis were immediately released for lack of evidence and the other seventeen were handed over to the Iraqi police. Eight were on an arrest list and appeared before a judge. The reputedly untouchable clan had been dealt a severe blow, and the Iraqi police resumed patrols in the tribe's area the very next day.⁸³

The Dutch battle group's next arrest operation fitted the mandate more readily. It entailed the arrest of Iraqis suspected of involvement in a gunfight in which a Spanish *Guardia Civil* Major was killed. On 22 January 2004, a Spanish military police patrol had driven into an ambush laid by the Nahi clan, which operated in both Al Qadisiyah province and the north-western part of Al Muthanna. This group was well-known for

its large-scale criminal activities and had fired at Coalition troops several times before. A complicating factor in the planning was the fact that the Spanish brigade was part of a different division. There were also some sensitive issues at stake for the Spanish side. With national elections imminent and with Iraq a major topic, Prime Minister José Maria Aznar's government could use a success. Several Spanish troops had been killed and the deployment had been extremely unpopular in Spain from the start. The Spanish applied a totally different operational concept from the Dutch. They had Iraqi police perform the actual arrests, while Spanish military personnel manned the outer ring for security. The Dutch in Al Muthanna planned to do the arrest of five suspects themselves. In contrast to previous major arrest operations, this time the police and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were also involved, but they were only allocated a role in the outer cordon.⁸⁴ Divisional headquarters provided 2 NLBG with an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV).

Operation Gonzalo, named after the Spanish officer who had been killed, kicked off in two phases on 28 February. The first phase took place at night and focused on two targets, each comprising several houses. The second phase was initiated at dawn and the Dutch again tackled two targets comprising several buildings. The Marines of 22 Infantry Company did not find the first three suspects at the expected location, but 21 Infantry Company was more successful and apprehended 'number five' on the list of suspects. 23 Infantry Company, which conducted a search and entry operation at a third location, also seemed to be out of luck when the search of a property showed that the suspect had departed. While the Marines prepared to withdraw, they received a report that the British UAV had spotted an Iraqi attempting to escape by swimming across the Euphrates. When the man was plucked out of the river, he turned out to be the number four suspect on the list. As planned, a Dutch Chinook helicopter flew the two apprehended suspects to the British detention facility in Shaibah.⁸⁵

In contrast to previous and later operations by 2 NLBG, the Ministry of Defence in the Netherlands reported this cordon, search and arrest operation in detail in a press release.⁸⁶ On this occasion, the suspects were clearly Anti Coalition Elements and the operation had been conducted jointly with the Iraqi security forces. Furthermore, the operation was in direct support of an ally. The Spanish colleagues' operation was less successful though. The three suspects they had set their sights on proved to have been tipped off in advance.⁸⁷ Once again, Coalition troops were confronted with the flaws in the Iraqi security apparatus.

SSR: the interim score

With a great deal of improvisation, the Dutch in Al Muthanna notched up some impressive achievements in building up Iraqi security forces and maintaining local security. They showed a great deal of creativity in designing their training and mentoring programmes and in the deployment of their own personnel. In doing so, they were granted additional support from the Netherlands. According to the Ministry of Defence, the results of the SSR effort made a mixed but predominantly positive picture. Up to March 2004, the NLBG had given 884 policemen a refresher training course and 400 new recruits had received basic police training. Over 100 extra border guards were also trained and 58 policemen followed a two-week management course based on study material provided by MND South-East.⁸⁸ The completion in early March of the construction, training and accommodation of a 520-strong Iraqi Civil Defence Corps battalion was also no mean feat.⁸⁹

Al Muthanna was more advanced in developing its police force, paramilitary forces and border guards than most of the neighbouring provinces. While the Al Muthanna authorities under Dutch supervision had evidently made the 1 April 2004 deadline for the handover of local control, elsewhere the Coalition had to push this date back. The transfer of regional control, whereby local security forces had to be able to operate independently at the provincial level, would now probably not take place before the end of 2004. The point at which the Iraqis would be able to take responsibility for security at the national level was therefore not likely to occur before mid-2005, according to the most optimistic estimates.

Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar witnessed the extra SSR efforts in Al Muthanna starting to bear fruit as early as January 2004. In particular there was a greater police presence on the streets. "What they need now is more self-confidence and support among the population," he noted.⁹⁰ According to the NLBG commander, it was a case of two steps forward, one step back. Police lining their own pockets continued to be a major problem, and Oppelaar exercised severe pressure on governor Al Hassani to get rid of corrupt personnel.⁹¹ The many arrests of criminals and subversive elements by the Dutch also demonstrated that the Al Muthanna security apparatus was not yet able to operate fully independently.

Dutch Minister of Defence Kamp was therefore somewhat premature in informing Parliament in December 2003 that he was confident the Iraqi government would be capable of guaranteeing the security of its own

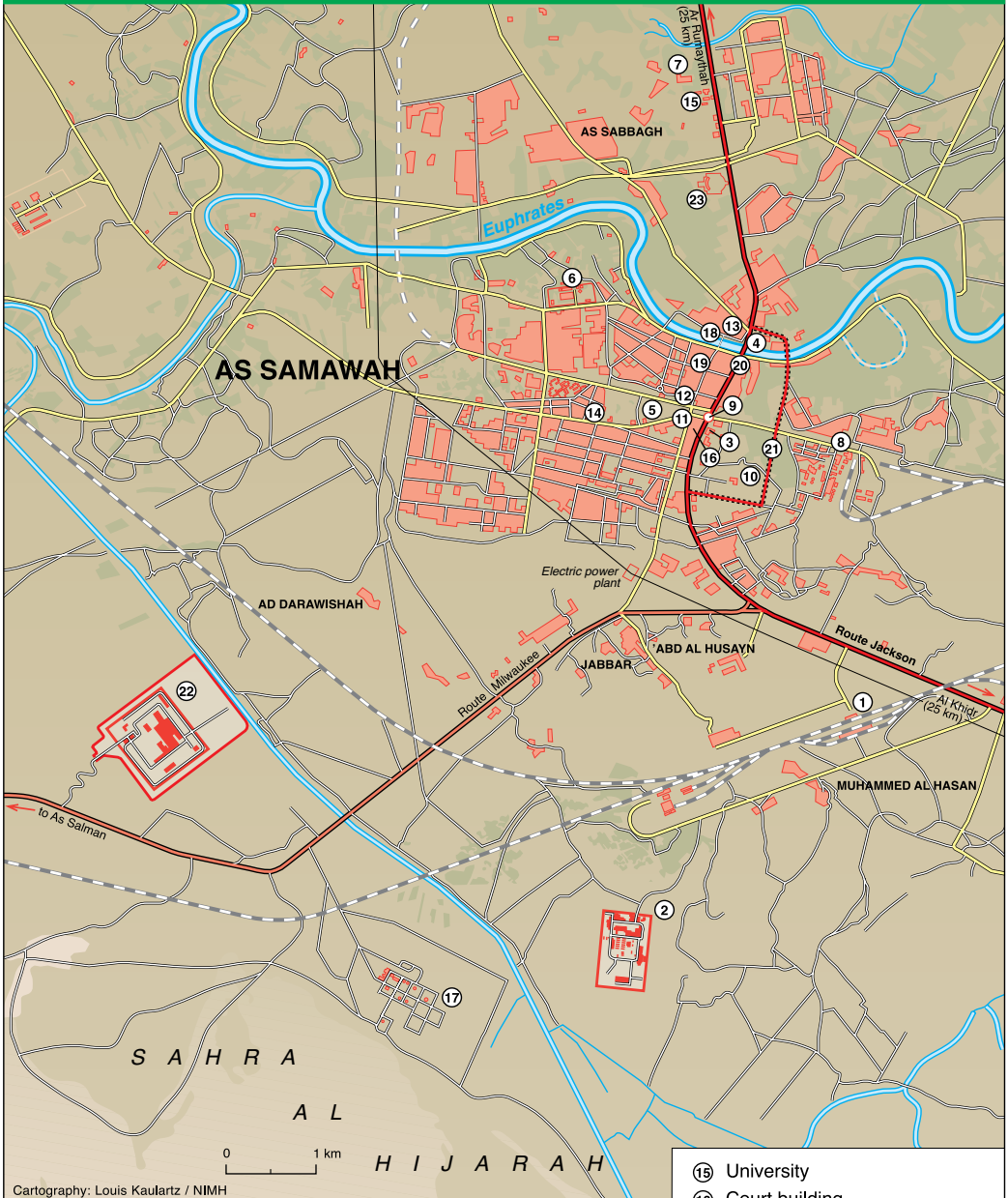
people in the spring of 2004. He expressed the hope that Dutch troops would be able to withdraw gradually from the towns and villages.⁹² This was still a long way off, however. When 2 NLBG's operation ended in March 2004, the signs in relation to SSR were nevertheless positive. In training and coaching the local security forces, the Dutch role shifted gradually to mentoring and monitoring, which meant that Dutch military personnel were less and less involved in actual law and order tasks. The Dutch also increasingly used trained Iraqi cadres to educate their new colleagues. This caused Minister Kamp to decide in mid-April 2004 that the number of extra personnel for SSR tasks could be substantially reduced.⁹³

The fact that Al Muthanna was doing well compared to many other Iraqi provinces could largely be ascribed to the Dutch and Iraqis being able to conduct their operations unhindered by bombings or armed attacks by insurgent groups, which were rife elsewhere in Iraq.⁹⁴ The real test of Iraqi security personnel was still to come, now that unrest was growing and there were signs of a power struggle evolving within the Shia community. Had the quantitative achievements, made under pressure due to the approaching deadline for Iraqi self-government, been at the expense of quality? The police reform programme in particular had been focussed on churning out large numbers of new recruits. It was becoming clear that the Al Muthanna police force's main weaknesses were its failing leadership and defective management. The picture was similar in the other security services. How they would deal with a tougher scenario – an approaching armed insurgency – would have to become clear after the arrival of a new Dutch battle group.

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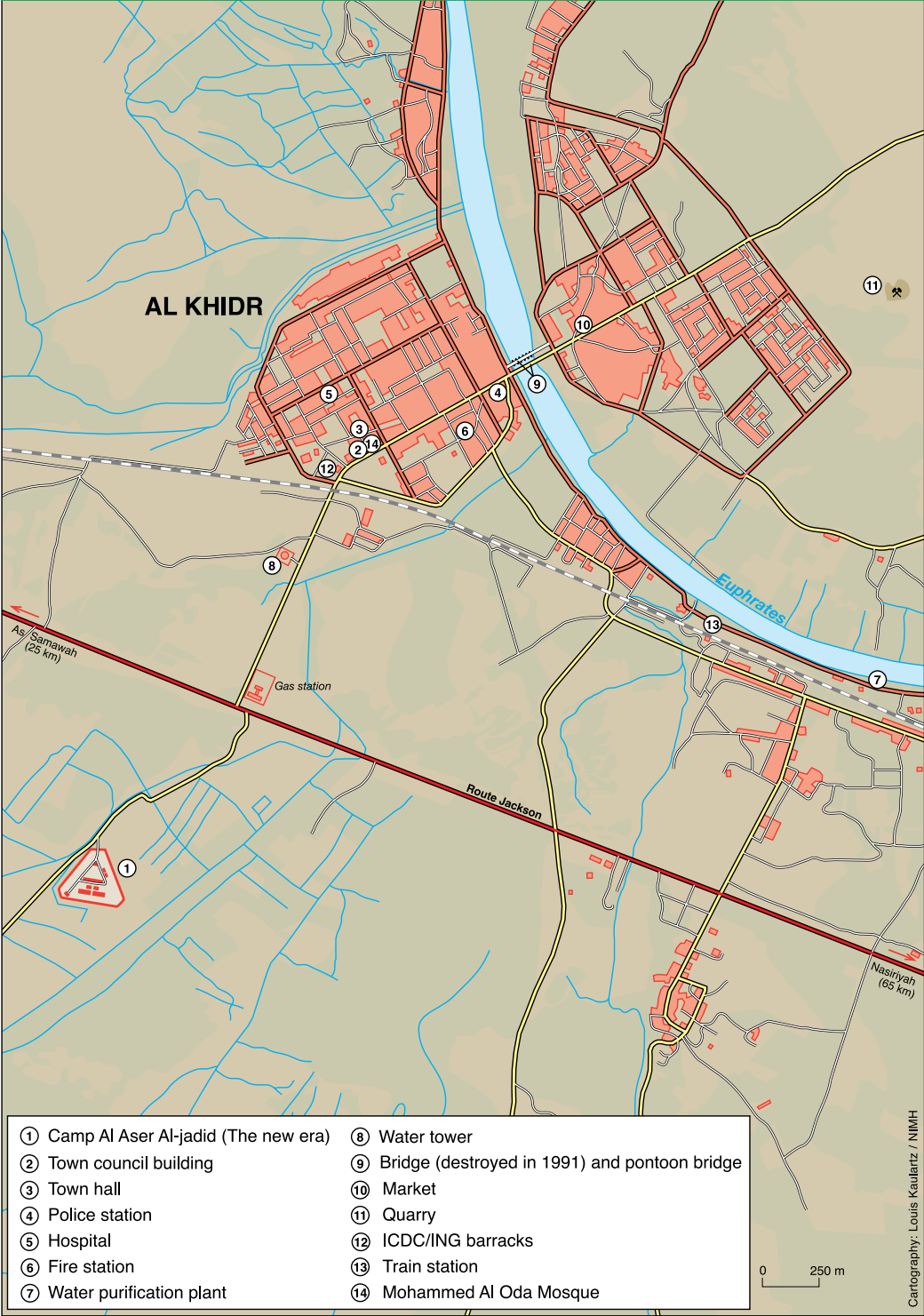


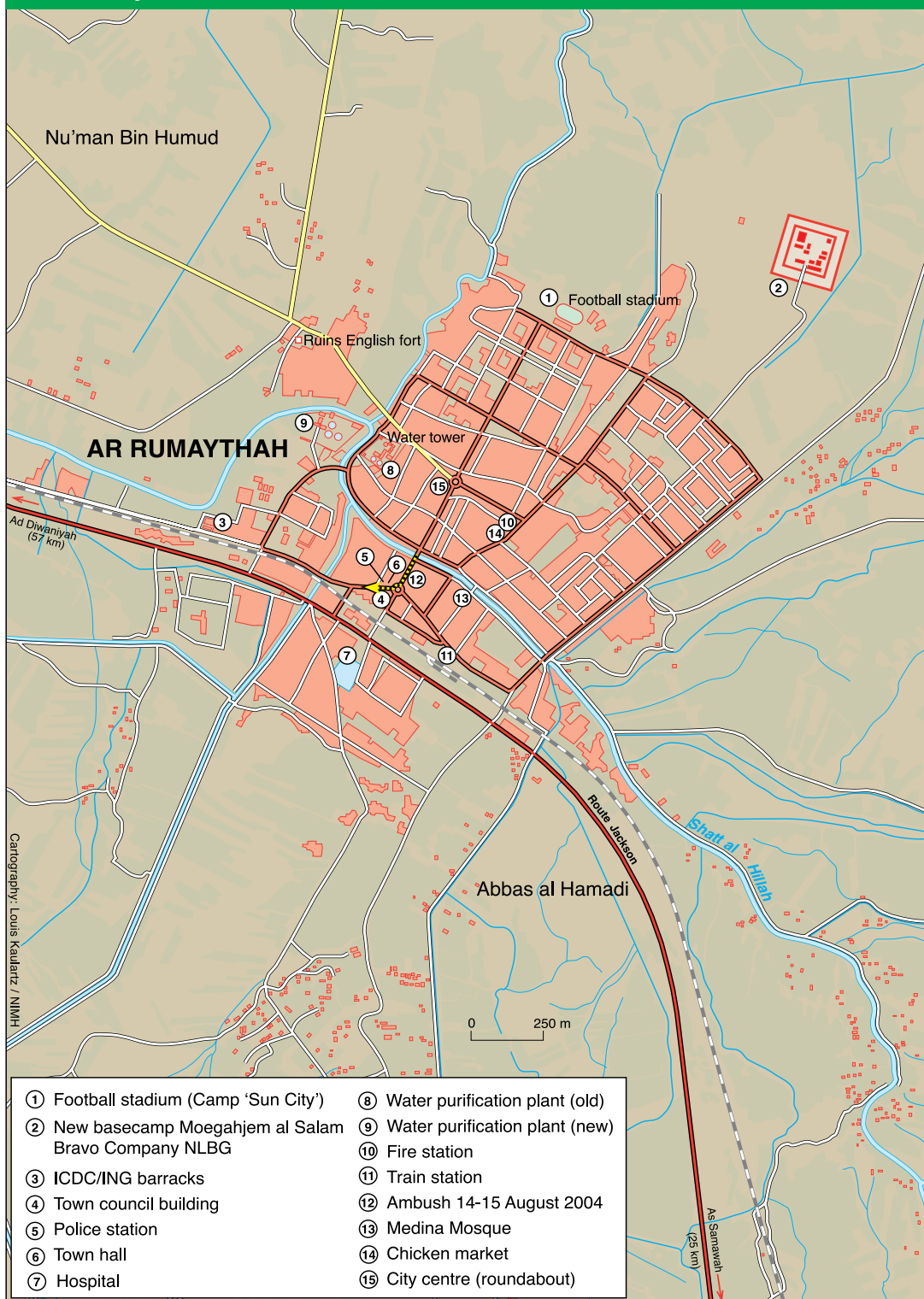
Cartography: Louis Kaulartz / NIMH

- ① Camp Smitty (I) / railway (workshop) emplacement
- ② Camp Smitty (II)
- ③ CPA building (CIMIC, Polad, QRF, FLT)
- ④ ICDC/ING barracks
- ⑤ Police headquarters
- ⑥ Hospital
- ⑦ Children's hospital

- ⑧ Cement factory
- ⑨ Watertower / city centre
- ⑩ Television broadcast mast
- ⑪ Governor's compound
- ⑫ Sheep / weapons market
- ⑬ Prison
- ⑭ 'Sadr-House'

- ⑮ University
- ⑯ Court building
- ⑰ Oil storage / depot
- ⑱ Pontoon bridge
- ⑲ Indoor market
- ⑳ Attack 10 May 2004
- ㉑ Ringroad
- ㉒ Camp Japanese humanitarian support battalion
- ㉓ Football stadium







Al Muthanna was the birthplace of the notion of a relatively subtle and allegedly successful 'Dutch approach' to stabilisation operations. (Photo: mcd)



From a British base in Kuwait Dutch troops head for Southern Iraq, 19 July 2003. (Photo: mcd)



'Spot the difference'. Dutch policymakers emphasised the difference between the Dutch Stabilisation Force (SFIR) and the US occupation force, but for Iraqis it may have been difficult to tell a US Marine (left) apart from his Dutch colleague (right), As Samawah 31 July 2003. (Photo: MCD)



American troops hand over command to the Netherlands Battle Group (NLBG) in the presence of Iraqi officials, 31 July 2003. (Photo: MCD)





At Tallil Airbase near Nasiriyah, the crew of a Royal Netherlands Air Force Chinook helicopter prepares for take-off. (Photo: MCD)



Dutch forces raid the Al Khidr market in search of illegal weapons, September 2003. (Photo: MCD)



The lightly armoured wheeled Patria was the heaviest vehicle in the Dutch Battle group's arsenal. (Photo: MCD)



Iraqi informants recognise one of the persons listed as a suspect during Operation Greenfield, a major raid on the As Samawah sheep and weapons market, 21 October 2003. (Photo: MCD)



Two of the eighty Iraqis arrested during Operation Greenfield, 21 October 2003. (Photo: MCD)



Sunrise over Camp Smitty, the Netherlands Battle Group's main base just outside As Samawah. During the Summer of 2003, temperatures would often surpass 50 degrees Celsius. (Photo: mcd)



British Army Colonel Maurice Bulmer addresses the municipal elections meeting in Al Khidr, 13 August 2003. As he is acting as the interim CPA Governorate Coordinator, he is wearing civilian clothes. The Arab-speaking Dutch political adviser Michel Rentenaar is taking notes. (Photo: NLBG)



CPA Governorate Coordinator Dick Andrews installs governor Mohammed al Hassani, who had been elected during a provincial level caucus procedure that became known in CPA circles as the 'Al Muthanna model', 18 October 2003. (Photo: MCD)



Voting in El Sweir, December 2003. (Photo: Nicholas Blanford)



Iraqi police and Dutch Marechaussees (Military Police) inspect fuel distribution at a petrol station in As Samawah. (Photo: mcd)



A Dutch Marine and a recruit from the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (ICDC) on joint guard duty in As Samawah. (Photo: MCD)



Dutch platoon base Victoria was created on the edge of the desert town of As Salman as part of an effort to intercept possible terrorist infiltrations from Saudi Arabia, November 2003. (Photo: NIMH)

A Dutch Marechaussee instructs local policemen during an arrest and self-defence course. (Photo: MCD)





Iraqi policemen are instructed in the use of their new Dutch-supplied Glock pistols. (Photo: MCD)



A Marechaussee inspects the As Samawah prison. (Photo: MCD)



A us soldier fires a smoke grenade in order to disperse looters looking for stranded supply-trucks around Route Jackson, November 2003. (Photo: MCD)



Several hours before the 'Eric O. incident' (see page 118) two Marines hold a crowd at bay around Route Jackson, 27 December 2003. (Photo: NMBG)



A Dutch Marine handles an Iraqi detainee directly after Operation Thunderstruck, 31 January 2003. (Photo: MCD)

A forced entry during Operation Gonzalo, 28 February 2004. What the Dutch battle group euphemistically called 'Knock Talk Search' operations were in fact often arrest operations, directly targeting criminal or insurgent groups. (Photo: MCD)





A Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (IED) detonated near a US convoy in As Samawah on 31 May 2004. IEDs were a rare occurrence in Al Muthanna during 2003-2005. (Photo: MCD)



A patrol in a Mercedes Benz all-terrain vehicle (MB) near As Samawah, July 2004. (Photo: MCD)

A Dutch-monitored patrol by the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) in As Samawah, April 2004. (Photo: MCD)





During the first Sadr revolt, Dutch troops intensified their weapons searches at mobile vehicle checkpoints such as these, 6 June 2004. (Photo: MCD)



The CPA-building, here at the left of the As Samawah water tower, offered a vulnerable target for a possible attack during the two Sadr risings of 2004. (Photo: MCD)



NLBG Special Forces snipers in action, 15 May 2004. They intimidated Sadrist fighters with .50 calibre warning shots and thus helped prevent an armed take-over of Al Muthanna's capital As Samawah. (Photo: KCT)

During a patrol, a Dutch infantryman shows Iraqi children his skills in riding a bicycle. (Photo: MCD)





Dutch troops guard two Iraqis whom they caught transporting 107mm rockets in the boot of their vehicle, 24 April 2004. (Photo: NLBG)



The Dutch had their first fatal casualty on 10 May 2004, when a sergeant who was guarding the main bridge over the Euphrates river died as a result of injuries sustained during an attack using hand grenades. (Photo: MCD)



A 120mm mortar in action in Camp Smitty, As Samawah. (Photo: mcd)

Two of the total of six Dutch Apache attack helicopters that the Netherlands sent to Iraq after the first Sadr revolt hover over Camp Smitty. (Photo: mcd)





CPA chief Paul Bremer sits next to governor Al Hassani during his visit to As Samawah on 17 June 2004. On the right is Commander 3 NLBG Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp. (Photo: MCD)

A local interpreter joins Dutch infantrymen on patrol in Ar Rumaythah, August 2004. (Photo: MCD)





On 14 August 2004, during the second Sadr revolt, the Dutch took their second deadly casualty during an ambush in Ar Rumaythah. MP-colleagues pay tribute to their fallen comrade as his coffin leaves Camp Smitty. (Photo: MCD)

A CIMIC staff officer visits a renovated school in the village of El Sweir. (Photo: MCD)





Iraqis during the celebrations for the start of construction of the As Samawah circular road, 15 December 2003. (Photo: mcd)



After their more aloof stance in the wake of the transfer of sovereignty and the second Sadr revolt, the Dutch intensified their urban patrols late in 2004. (Photo: mcd)



Dutch troops unload their rifles upon their return to base after a patrol. (Photo: MCD)



Dutch Defence Minister Henk Kamp meets Provincial Chief of Police Kareem, January 2005. (Photo: MCD)

A Dutch patrol from 5 NLBG passes personnel from the TSU Emergency Battalion in As Samawah, January 2005. (Photo: MCD)





An Iraqi police officer searches those waiting in line to cast their votes, As Samawah, 30 January 2005. (Photo: MCD)





On patrol in Ar Rumaythah, January 2005. (Photo: mcd)

5

Caught between a power struggle and an uprising

Operation Swatter

In the early hours of Thursday 1 April 2004, at precisely 2am local time, the inhabitants of four residential complexes near As Samawah received unexpected visitors. Dutch and British forces burst into their houses and detained all 21 men found there. The homes were searched; all weapons, ammunition, computers, ID and money were confiscated. The Coalition troops subsequently took the men outside, where US liaison officers officially arrested them. Ninety minutes after the start of the operation, the Americans and their detainees left for Tallil air base in a British Chinook helicopter. There, the men were transferred to a C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and taken to Baghdad.¹

Operation Swatter was a large-scale 'Knock Talk Search' operation in which Coalition troops acted as cordon, search and arrest teams. The operation set its sights on a group of suspected arms, drugs and human traffickers. Military forces rounded up the criminal network at the request of the Americans, as it supported the armed uprising in the Sunni regions of Iraq by smuggling arms and radical Islamic fighters (including suicide bombers) from Saudi Arabia to Iraq. The network was also connected to former Baath party members. The clan and family tie-based As Samawah criminal organisation was headed by Shirshab Tarish al Zayadi, who had long been sought by the authorities. Although the allies initially thought that Shirshab had been captured during the operation, it later turned out that he was not among the detainees. The operation nevertheless dealt a severe blow to his organisation.²

Operation Swatter's commanding officer was the new commander of the Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna, Lieutenant Colonel Richard van Harskamp, an army officer who together with his mechanised infantry battalion had taken over from 2 NLBG two weeks earlier. The new battle group, 3 NLBG, was built up around Van Harskamp's 42 Armoured Infantry Battalion (*Limburgse Jagers* Regiment) and a company from 12 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (*Van Heutsz* Regiment). Almost all sub-units of the NLBG participated in the major KTS operation, or were on standby as reserves or acted in a support capacity. For Operation Swatter, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp had also been allocated the support of a British infantry company, Puma and Lynx helicopters, sniper teams, a Chinook helicopter to transport detainees, a Phoenix UAV and a Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft to monitor targets and the operation from the air.³

The British infantry company (Delta Company from 2 Para Battalion, stationed at Shaibah Logbase) entered two nearby locations about one kilometre from the Dutch Camp Smitty. The objective of two Dutch companies from 3 NLBG was slightly further away, but also very close to As Samawah. A third company from the NLBG was on standby as airmobile reserve. The search locations had been given code names, in this case the makes of cars: Buick, Chrysler, Audi 1 and Audi 2. The Dutch – who surrounded and entered the Buick and Chrysler locations – opted to use commandos from the FLT and reconnaissance personnel as the search and entry team. Regular armoured infantry personnel manned the cordon around the locations.⁴

Van Harskamp reported Operation Swatter to be a success. Not a single shot was fired, there were no casualties and, with one exception, all the suspects had been arrested and handed over to the Americans. The new NLBG commander was disappointed, however, that such a large-scale operation by the Dutch contingent had passed unnoticed in the Dutch media, and therefore by the country in general. "At a time when there is much debate about whether to extend [the Dutch contribution after July 2004] and when the presence of terrorist groups [in the Dutch area of operations] is a topic of discussion, it seems to me that successes like this one should be exploited as much as possible," the Lieutenant Colonel grumbled. In his opinion, the neglect also failed to do justice to the achievements of his personnel and "the (considerable) risks" they had run.⁵

Van Harskamp was in fact arguing in favour of a more open media policy, in the conviction that this would contribute to broader support for the Iraq mission. The top echelons in The Hague did not seem convinced,

however. Operation Swatter did not properly match the image of the Dutch allied contribution as a mission in the tradition of peacekeeping, excluding executive police tasks or anti-terrorist operations. The Ministry of Defence's official press release stated rather evasively that Dutch forces had merely provided "assistance" in the arrests (made by the British) and gave the impression that only the Dutch helicopter detachment had provided transport support.⁶

Operation Swatter was 3 NLBG's baptism of fire in Iraq, and a good illustration of the state of affairs. It was a major cordon and search operation, similar to previous actions to improve public order and security conducted by the NLBG. In fact, it was a larger follow-up to a KTS conducted by the Marines on 19 January against the same group of traffickers. Also, a couple of weeks previously, on 17 March, 3 NLBG had provided support – on a smaller scale – to a similar arrest operation by British Special Forces, which had been dubbed Operation Meatloaf. This type of operation against criminal organisations which supported the insurgency had become the norm over the past few months. It meant that the NLBG was chiefly acting to back up the new Iraqi regime as it increasingly came under attack from irregular opponents. The action against the trafficking mafia was intended as a counter-terrorism measure, by striking at the logistics of the armed resistance. Operation Swatter demonstrated how the stabilisation operation was beginning to take on the characteristics of a counter-insurgency.

This was also evident from the guidelines issued by the British divisional headquarters to the Dutch battle group. For months, the divisional commander's list of assignments, based partly on that of the US high command in Baghdad, included: defeat terrorism. This was followed by: neutralise 'non-compliant forces'. The threat assessment spoke of a "major physical threat" from, among others, terrorists, militias, foreign fighters, religious extremists and criminal groups. Each for its own individual reasons, these enemies were attempting to derail the political, administrative and social transformation which was to lead to the transfer of sovereignty from the CPA to a new Iraqi government in June 2004.

Since the summer of 2003, US forces in the northern Sunni regions had been the primary target of the emerging insurgency, which concentrated in the urban areas. However, the Shi'ite south was not immune to these developments. Resistance movements started to target Coalition troops to sow doubt among the ranks and on the home front about the usefulness of participating in the occupation initiated by the US and the UK. Attacks

against the Italians, Spanish and Japanese were examples of this tactic.⁷ At the end of January 2004, the Dutch embassy in Baghdad was targeted by rocket fire.⁸ The other feature of the violence in Southern Iraq was an evolving bitter and violent power struggle between the different Shiite factions. It was this development which caused the greatest concern.

The mismanagement of the occupation by the CPA and the inability of the occupying powers to respond effectively to the irregular military threats made the situation even more complex. US forces made matters worse by conducting intelligence (and interrogation) operations that had the opposite effect to what was intended and which – when the manner in which they were carried out became public – tarnished the image of the US leadership and of the entire Iraq operation. In March and April, the first stories emerged of the systematic abuse of Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison complex to the west of Baghdad.⁹ These events could not be ignored in the southern region either – although it was a different operational environment from the Sunni areas, where there had been robust armed resistance for some time.¹⁰

It was difficult for Coalition members to distance themselves from such developments. The NLBG had conducted various cordon and search operations, such as Operation Swatter, at the request and in the presence of American and British troops. The detainees from these operations had in some cases been handed over to US military personnel. Certainly, the 21 prisoners captured in Operation Swatter had been transported to Abu Ghraib.¹¹ Moreover, in Iraqi eyes all foreign military personnel were part of the same Coalition. Why would detainees in British or Dutch hands be safeguarded from the kind of treatment dealt out to detainees by the Americans? The American misconduct affected the whole allied campaign.

For the time being, the gathering storm of the insurgency did not seem to hit Al Muthanna, at least. Examples of everyday occurrences during the first weeks of 3 NLBG's deployment included the arrest of a number of criminals; support for apprehensions by the Iraqi police; the recovery of stranded vehicles on Routes Tampa and Jackson; and the confiscation of weapons from people who could not produce a valid weapon permit. On 27 March, explosive ordnance personnel cleared some grenades from a location in As Samawah. Two children had been killed that day when a high-explosive shell they were playing with exploded. Infantry personnel provided security for an operation by the NLBG's engineers to raise and fortify a dyke near Al Khidr. It had been close to collapse after the water level of the Euphrates river had risen substantially over the previous

few days.¹² Also, 3 NLBG's Alpha Company conducted joint patrols in As Samawah with the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps. The daily reports by the various sub-units frequently contained statements such as "it is quiet", "another hot day" and "no irregularities".¹³

This image of relative calm tied in with the optimistic mood in which the Marines had handed over Al Muthanna to 3 NLBG. At the change of command ceremony Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar, the departing commander, in the presence of local dignitaries such as governor Al Hassani, CPA administrator Soriano, British divisional commander Major General Stewart and the second most senior US general in Iraq, Lieutenant General Thomas Metz, noted that the province he left behind could "be considered as one of the most secure and stable areas in Iraq". This did not stop the 2 NLBG commander, however, from issuing a warning: "there are still elements that seek instability. And this province is not an island in a great ocean."¹⁴

Armed opposition: the Mahdi Army

Oppelaar had a point. Something had been brewing in Southern Iraq for a while, which could also have consequences for Al Muthanna. Basra and its surroundings were particularly turbulent, and opposing forces regularly attacked Iraqi security services and Coalition troops. Dutch military personnel at divisional headquarters and at Shaibah Logbase reported on this, even though they had so far been largely unaffected.¹⁵ At the Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna, it was initially the teams that conducted the 'information operations' which noticed a marked deterioration in the atmosphere. The Info Ops group (also known as PsyOps, from 'psychological operations') ensured that the Iraqi people in the Dutch sector were informed about the intentions and activities of the NLBG. To this end, the battle group's PsyOps Support Element (PSE) teams were often to be found out on the streets, where they handed out flyers and newsletters, kept local media informed, put up posters or played messages via loudspeakers. The PSE functioned as one of the feelers put out in 3 NLBG's area of operations.

On 1 April, in consultation with commander Van Harskamp, the head of the PSE decided to halt a campaign that had been going on for a few days and was aimed specifically at the tens of thousands of Shiite pilgrims travelling northwards through the province to celebrate the religious *Arba'een* festival at sacred sites in the cities of Karbala and Najaf. The

reason for ending the campaign was “an increasingly aggressive response” to Dutch military personnel handing out flyers. When questioned, a local imam explained the conduct of the pilgrims by stating that anger at the Coalition and the poorly functioning CPA in general was now so deep-seated among some groups in Southern Iraq that they no longer distinguished between the different national contingents of the Coalition.¹⁶

In little over a year, the euphoria in the south of Iraq at the toppling of the Baath regime and the end of decades of repression had transformed into widespread antipathy towards Coalition Forces. The negative sentiment was growing. The majority of Shiites, however, still intended to wait patiently until the foreigners had left. This also applied in the quiet ‘Dutch’ province of Al Muthanna, where Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported that it was as if the locals “were happy to sit back and wait for 30 June [the date for the transfer of sovereignty] before pursuing their own agenda”.¹⁷ The view held by the majority of Shiites was that the international forces should depart as soon as possible after that date.¹⁸

Yet not everyone was that patient. The Sadr movement again began openly to cause trouble in March 2004, having slowly but surely expanded its influence in the Shiite neighbourhoods of Baghdad and other major towns in the south over the previous months. It got support from those who were dissatisfied with the chaos, the poor governance and the violence in large parts of the country. Iraqi political parties in general, but specifically the Sadrists, organised demonstrations against the high levels of unemployment, fuel shortages or poor utilities. Emotions ran high at these events. There was widespread incomprehension about the fact that the foreigners – perceived as rich and all-powerful – were apparently incapable of solving everyday problems and improving living standards. Muqtada al Sadr gained many supporters among the large group of poorly educated, unemployed young people in urban areas who were hardest hit by these problems.¹⁹

In Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf, the Mahdi Army was again seen carrying weapons on the streets in order to – as they themselves said – maintain law and order for ordinary citizens. After months of hesitation, the CPA took up the gauntlet. The occupation authority closed down Al Sadr’s *Al Hawza* newspaper on 28 March 2004; it was generally assumed that it did so in order to goad the populist leader into a response.²⁰ The Shiites became furious when an associate of Al Sadr was arrested on 3 April. Their anger was further fuelled by the announcement that an arrest warrant had been issued against the leader himself in relation to the murder in 2003 of Ayatollah Abdul-Majid al Khoei.

Al Sadr escalated the crisis. He barricaded himself in a mosque in Kufa, and later in Najaf, and called on his followers to put up resistance. His Mahdi Army forcibly occupied government buildings and police stations in many southern towns. It was a deliberate attempt to seize power and quickly led to an armed confrontation with Coalition troops. The Spanish contingent's camps in Najaf, north of Al Muthanna, were attacked and fire fights broke out between the Mahdi Army and the Italians in Dhi Qar province. A Coalition compound was also attacked in Diwaniyah, close to Al Muthanna. US forces, which had been faced with a large-scale armed uprising in the Sunni areas for some time already, were now also fighting the Sadrists in Baghdad. The British, Ukrainian and Polish contingents fought for control over the towns of Amarah, Al Kut and Karbala respectively. It was noticeable during this widespread violence that the other Shiite parties and groups, and in particular SCIRI's Badr Brigade militia, remained on the sidelines.

Province of peace?

In Al Muthanna, where over the previous days the Dutch troops had experienced hostility from the pilgrims travelling to Karbala and Najaf, the situation remained remarkably calm compared to the widespread violence in the surrounding provinces. It had long been known that the Sadr movement had no power base in the region and was poorly organised. On 30 March, political adviser Robbert van Lanschot distributed an analysis explaining why he believed Al Muthanna would remain relatively immune to political violence or dominance by extremist groups. Van Lanschot's evaluation proved to be quite accurate in relation to the sudden Sadr uprising a couple of days later.

The factors which had made and would keep Al Muthanna a "province of peace" were, in the diplomat's view, the authoritarian governor Al Hassani, an admired former resistance leader with many of his own militia in the police forces; the widespread social control by the tribes, who negotiated in social conflicts and closely monitored the arrival and actions of outsiders; the lack of an urban proletariat (Sadr was mainly successful in recruiting poor, unemployed youngsters in impoverished neighbourhoods in the great cities) and the fact that the population was almost homogeneously Arab-Shia, which meant that sectarian violence could be ruled out.²¹

Nevertheless, the Sadrists also tried to gain a foothold in Al Muthanna. Their initial success in neighbouring provinces encouraged them to

attempt to expand their influence to include the desert ‘oasis’ protected by the Dutch. They initially targeted Ar Rumaythah, where an armed crowd gathered in front of the Medina mosque on 5 April. The local Sadr movement leader and imam at the mosque, Fadhil Ashaara, gave the police an ultimatum: all cops should lay aside their uniforms and weapons, and the Mahdi Army would take over the local police station. The FPS, the security service for government buildings which contained many Ashaara sympathisers, simply dissolved into thin air. However, the regular police refused to give in to the Sadrist demands. Police Commissioner Ali Mutheser Nejem and Mayor Abbas Mansur entered into consultations with Ashaara in order to prevent an armed confrontation. The Dutch Bravo Company responsible for the area was asked to act with restraint and kept out of the way. As a temporary compromise, six unarmed ‘observers’ from the Sadr group were allowed into the police station. Before long, however, a delegation of eminent tribal leaders visited Ashaara and warned him to stop causing trouble. The Sadrists subsequently departed quietly from the police station. The Sadr movement’s attempt to neutralise the police in Rumaythah and take over the town had failed.²²

It was striking that governor Al Hassani rose to the occasion and manifested himself as a powerful leader after these events. That same evening, he summoned the province’s tribal and religious leaders to his office. Above all, he recognised the situation as one from which he could benefit politically, by acting as the true wielder of power.²³ The next day, he agreed with CPA administrator Soriano and NLBG commander Van Harskamp that the Iraqi security services in the province would play a leading role in curbing the uprising. The Dutch would monitor from a distance whether the Iraqis were capable of maintaining law and order by themselves. If not, the Dutch could act against the Mahdi Army anyway. In the meantime, 3 NLBG conducted patrols in order to display as great a presence as possible and to keep abreast of what was going on.²⁴

In the evening of 6 April, on local television, governor Al Hassani called on the population to stay away from planned demonstrations against the Coalition and the CPA. The protests the next day in the province’s three towns attracted few participants and passed off peacefully. Only thirty people participated in As Samawah. The Iraqi police and the Civil Defence Corps were “accompanied from the sidelines” by Dutch forces and had the situation well under control. Reports reached the NLBG that the Sadr movement had been “substantially” intimidated by local leaders, security services and ordinary citizens. “This mechanism apparently works in this

province,” Van Harskamp reported to the Dutch Defence Staff. The NLBG commander expressed his intention, however, of remaining alert, as he was not convinced that the situation would simply resolve itself.²⁵

That, contrary to appearances, the Iraqi authorities still felt insecure was demonstrated by the fact that none of the Iraqi border police personnel in As Samawah reported for duty that day.²⁶ Vigilance was required while the situation could at any moment erupt into urban warfare, the NLBG’s intelligence specialists expected, as it had in neighbouring Nasiriyah. In recent days that town had seen heavy fighting between Italian troops and the Mahdi Army. It could be assumed that the Sadrists would attempt some kind of action in Al Muthanna too. This prediction was borne out. On the night of 7 April, half an hour before midnight, the Japanese battalion’s camp came under indirect fire. Three 82mm mortar grenades fired from inside As Samawah landed just north of the perimeter fence. Two exploded. 3 NLBG immediately dispatched patrols from the nearby Dutch camp to search for the firing location, but the perpetrators had already fled.

The next morning, Iraqi police found a number of rocket-propelled grenades close to the CPA compound. Other channels tipped the troops off that the Mahdi Army had set its sights on the occupation authority’s office. The CPA buildings were indeed attacked at 10.30pm. A group of unknown individuals opened fire using automatic weapons and RPGs. The Dutch forces present – including Special Forces snipers housed there – and Blackwater private security guards contracted by the CPA returned fire, at which the attackers fled. Units from the NLBG, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps subsequently combed the city but failed to find the enemy combatants. A Dutch patrol came under fire from rocket grenades during this search.²⁷

The attack led CPA boss Jim Soriano to decide the next morning to evacuate his employees to the Dutch base camp outside town. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp offered the CPA administrators accommodation, but also expressed his dissatisfaction at the move. He thought that the evacuation gave the “wrong signals” to the troublemakers.²⁸ Governor Al Hassani also thought that the risk to local CPA staff should not be exaggerated and believed that the occupation authority should hold its ground. The governor blamed the attack on the compound the previous day on nothing more than a psychological need by Sadr followers to ‘do something’, while in fact they had largely been neutralised under pressure from the local power brokers.²⁹ Once Soriano had been reassured by Van Harskamp and Al Hassani, he and his staff returned to their quarters in the city.

Around this time, 3 NLBG encountered more and more armed civilians in different parts of the province. Patrols reported that there were armed guards in the Dawa and SCIRI party buildings in As Samawah. Iraqis from all walks of life seemed to have decided it was better to arm themselves. There was a growing risk that groups would choose to ally themselves with the insurgency out of opportunism or self-preservation, intelligence officers estimated.³⁰ In the early hours of 10 April, a Bravo Company patrol stopped a red Mazda car carrying four nervous-looking men just outside Ar Rumaythah. In the boot they found an 82mm mortar, five mortar grenades, guns and ammunition, and hand grenades. One of the men was carrying a Badr Brigade ID card. The men were arrested for possessing prohibited weapons and were transported to the British DTDF prison complex in Shaibah via Camp Smitty.³¹ A day and a half later, on the morning of Sunday 11 April, a Charlie Company patrol intercepted a minibus carrying another four men. They were in possession of a rocket launcher and ten rockets. They were also apprehended and sent to the DTDF.³²

At this stage of the uprising, the overall impression of the threat was rather vague. No-one knew exactly what roles the parties other than the Mahdi Army played. There were rumours that criminal organisations were involved. The SCIRI militia was also acting in a suspicious manner. The intercepted vehicles containing weapons could be linked to that group. The weapons could have been intended for self-defence, but the Dutch forces had to assume that SCIRI might try to provoke an armed conflict between the NLBG and the Mahdi Army. Sources in As Samawah confirmed that both the mortar attack on the Japanese camp and the attack on the CPA compound were indeed the work of the Sadr movement. Other information pointed to the continued threat posed by a handful of Baathists, and in one case in Ar Rumaythah the two threats combined: a Major and influential member of the former ruling party was thought to be supporting (or to have joined) the Mahdi Army and to be preparing attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces.³³

It was certainly true that the armed opposition was seeking ways to affect and weaken the Iraqi security organisations. Rumour had it that the Mahdi Army also wanted to abduct a member of the international forces. For some time, elsewhere in Iraq, various resistance movements had successfully been using kidnappings of foreigners, military personnel or aid workers as scare tactics in their propaganda campaign (including shocking beheadings circulated on the internet) or to force concessions or ransoms. On 12 April, in response to this threat, Lieutenant Colonel

Van Harskamp discussed security measures for two high-ranking Dutch officials in his area of operations: political adviser Van Lanschot and the newly-appointed police mentor at the CPA, Colonel Veltman. Both worked from the CPA compound in As Samawah and regularly travelled around the province. Colonel Veltman had one close-protection guard, a Sergeant from the Marechaussee's Special Security Missions Brigade (BSB). Diplomat Van Lanschot had no close protection at all. He had an arrangement with Van Harskamp to have commando Special Forces and reconnaissance personnel from the NLBG assigned to him for personal protection.³⁴

The battle group commander thought that the situation warranted improved security measures.³⁵ For the time being, Veltman and Van Harskamp agreed to support from the NLBG "while awaiting [extra] close protection from the Special Security Missions Brigade". The Defence Staff in The Hague also recognised the need for improved protection for the two Dutchmen who moved around a lot and were therefore vulnerable. A special protection team from the BSB was created, which arrived in the area of operations in mid-May. It brought two armoured vehicles with it. Several weeks later, another two armoured vehicles and three close-protection guards were added.³⁶

Incidents and provocations

Regardless of the unrest, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported that the Iraqis were eager to be in charge. He wrote that "this desire is very clear from various conversations between NLBG personnel and the tribes, locals and public administration officials".³⁷ It therefore suited the main provincial players that the Dutch commander and his staff opted to continue their policy of giving the Iraqis the lead in countering the uprising. The idea was that as of June the NLBG would be able to adopt a new role of providing assistance only. The recent attacks did not alter this strategy. At the end of April – in the midst of the Sadr uprising – this approach was even laid down in an official operational order.³⁸

Although alert to escalation, the Dutch therefore kept their distance while maintaining a presence and standing ready. Intervention was not required, however, as the Iraqis had the situation firmly under control.³⁹ A demonstration by about 150 Sadr followers on 14 April in As Samawah, for instance, was closely supervised. The governor had permitted the protest in advance. The police had the upper hand throughout and the march through town was resolutely ended when the demonstrators got too close

to the CPA compound. There was no violence or disturbance of any kind. The Dutch 'green MPs', who were observing events, reported: "The I[r]aqi P[olice] had the demonstration fully under control from start to finish. ... Each major junction was cordoned off and traffic was subsequently allowed to move again once the demonstrators had passed." Once the police had broken up the demonstration, the assembly "dispersed into small groups and returned to the town".⁴⁰

The efforts by the Iraqi authorities to keep control of the situation did not altogether prevent attacks from occurring. Some contacts, however, appeared to be misunderstandings. On Saturday 17 April, an Alpha Company patrol was involved in a gunfight in As Samawah. Following a tip-off, that evening Dutch troops headed for a junction close to the football stadium in the north of the town, where opposing forces were reportedly preparing an ambush. Alpha Company's personnel set up a temporary observation post near the location and waited. After a while, two armed men approached the Dutch position and opened fire. The infantrymen shot and captured both. One of the attackers was seriously injured. His condition was so critical that he had to be operated on in the NLBG's mobile field hospital at Camp Smitty. He turned out to be a security guard at the stadium and explained that he had fired at the Dutch because he thought they were looters.⁴¹

That same evening, an Iraqi Civil Defence Corps checkpoint near Ar Rumaythah was fired on from a car. A few days later, on the night of 20 April, the attack was repeated. On that occasion, the Iraqi paramilitary forces reported that the occupants of a white Opel had fired at them with a rifle. A patrol from Bravo Company hurried to their aid. There was no sign of the gunmen when the Dutch infantry arrived at the checkpoint. The patrol commander was briefed by his Iraqi colleague and the two conducted a search. Shortly afterwards, a Mercedes coming from Ar Rumaythah drove at the Dutch and Iraqi troops at high speed. The Iraqis opened fire. A Dutch lieutenant also fired at the vehicle, which by now had sped through the blockade and had come to a stop about one hundred metres further on. Of the two occupants, the passenger died of his wounds on the spot. No weapons were found.⁴²

Dutch forces were also involved in incidents outside Al Muthanna. In the early morning of Wednesday 21 April, there was a coordinated attack with five simultaneous car bombs targeting Iraqi police buildings in the Basra area. It was the largest terrorist attack in Southern Iraq since the fall of the Baath regime. Dozens were killed.⁴³ One of the five suicide bombers

tried to drive onto the police academy site in As Zubayah. The explosion killed two Iraqi policemen, a relatively low number compared to the other attacks thanks to protective measures erected earlier, such as concrete obstacles near the gate. Dutch MP instructors were working “at a distance of about 75 metres from the blast” at the time, but were not hurt.⁴⁴

Although the Sadr movement still did not pose a real threat to the international assistance force in Al Muthanna or stability in the province, the number of provocations increased. At about 2.50am on 22 April, another mortar attack took place in As Samawah. This time, the target was not the Japanese but the Dutch camp. Guards observed two explosions, after which the alarm was raised and all personnel took shelter in the bunkers. Alpha Company “left the base with as many units as possible” in order to track down the culprits. Back at the camp, it was discovered how lucky the Dutch had been. A dud mortar had hit an accommodation container while its occupants were still inside. 3 NLBG had “had a close call,” Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported to The Hague. If the mortar had exploded “I estimate there would have been two [to] six deaths and an unknown number of injured.”⁴⁵

The mortar attack led to additional security measures in and around the Dutch camps. In order to be able to identify the source of enemy fire more quickly in the future, 3 NLBG asked the Defence Staff for permission to deploy tracking radar. Three of these systems were brought to the area of operations from the Netherlands a few weeks later.⁴⁶ This came too late for the next indirect fire incident, which rebels conducted exactly one week later. Three mortars landed near the Japanese camp at about 2.15am on Thursday 29 April. The bunker alarm sounded at the nearby Dutch camp too.⁴⁷ A day later it was the turn of Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah. Also at about 2am two 82mm mortars landed in the base and one outside. There was only material damage.⁴⁸ The mortar attacks received a great deal of attention in the Dutch media because of the sizeable press presence, which happened to be in theatre to cover a visit to the NLBG by Minister of Defence Henk Kamp.

On 30 April, the Minister’s and his entourage’s final evening in Al Muthanna, 3 NLBG received a reliable tip that a smuggler with ties to the resistance who had evaded capture four weeks previously during Operation Swatter would be at his home in As Samawah. Jasim Musair Shauree was the right-hand man of the Zayadi gang leader Shirshab. The NLBG immediately planned a house search, which was conducted by commandos from the FLT. The suspect was detained and handed over to the British.⁴⁹ This was remarkable, in light of the recent Abu Ghraib prison

scandal. The procedure of handing detainees over to the British continued however.⁵⁰ As far as the Dutch were concerned, responsibility for handling the prisoners correctly lay with the occupying powers.⁵¹

Trafficking in explosives and weapons, and the public use of arms by unauthorised persons and militias continued, resulting in more incidents. On 24 April, a day on which the province suffered very heavy rainfall and strong winds, a Charlie Company patrol intercepted an arms trafficker with nine 107mm rockets in his car near Al Khidr. Under cover of the bad weather, the man was attempting to take the rockets from Basra to Karbala but encountered a temporary vehicle checkpoint, or vcp, manned by the Dutch infantry. He turned round and escaped, but was later caught making a detour. The smuggler and his passenger were arrested. The man claimed he was transporting the mortars for money on behalf of an armed group that wanted to use them against Coalition forces in Karbala. His passenger proved to be an innocent hitchhiker.⁵²

A day later, on the evening of 25 April, an incident took place in the same area. At about 9.30pm, a car approached another Charlie Company vcp, stopped and turned round. The Dutch troops at the checkpoint warned a patrol nearby. Two military vehicles blocked the car's possible escape route. The driver responded by accelerating and driving at the Dutch forces at speed, narrowly missing two of them. The Dutch soldiers opened fire. The car crashed through the checkpoint and was pursued until it reached the town of Al Khidr. There the Dutch found it, containing one dead and two injured men. Four uninjured occupants were arrested. It later turned out to have been an unfortunate panic reaction by the driver, as the Iraqis in the vehicle thought they had encountered armed carjackers when they came across the checkpoint in the dark.⁵³

On Tuesday 4 May, yet another Charlie Company patrol came across a pick-up truck carrying armed men near the hamlet of Al Warka. The patrol stopped the vehicle. When a Dutch soldier got out and walked towards the Iraqis, the latter aimed their weapons. The Dutch rifle section responded to this hostile gesture by cocking and aiming their own rifles and machine guns. The Iraqis then fled on foot, abandoning their vehicle. They disappeared into the village. Subsequent inquiries showed that the men had not been anti-Coalition fighters but armed tribal militia members. There was an ongoing and heated dispute between two tribes in the area. The Dutch were urgently requested not to become involved. The company reserve arrived, searched a few houses and questioned villagers. No trace was found of the armed men.⁵⁴

The volatility of the situation in Al Muthanna as a result of such

incidents led to commander Van Harskamp and his staff reporting that it was “impossible” to estimate the threat level. Intelligence was not always of sufficient quality. On the one hand, after a few weeks of heightened tensions, there appeared to be a gradual normalisation of relations (certainly compared to the rest of Iraq, where heavy fighting was going on). On the other there were still occasional firefights, mortar attacks and interceptions of armed individuals. But Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported optimistically that “the signals given out by the population and the tribes were ... unanimous: we want peace and no violence; anyone who turns against the Dutch is also turning against us.” Yet, the NLBG commander added, “For what it’s worth! We remain on guard.”⁵⁵

The power struggle at its peak

One task for the NLBG in this period was the guarding or monitoring of important facilities, government buildings and main infrastructure works. Although permanent guard duties for the CPA premises had been handed over to the private security firm Blackwater in mid-March, there were plenty of vulnerable sites which still needed monitoring. One of these was the bridge over the Euphrates in As Samawah, which was a major bottleneck in the Route Jackson north/south connection. In mid-April, the British divisional commander ordered 3 NLBG to provide a permanent guard, after a similar crossing had been blown up by insurgents on Main Supply Route Tampa in the more northern central division’s sector. There had also been a number of other unsuccessful attacks on bridges. The impression was that opposing forces were attempting to sever the Coalition’s main supply routes. The blocking of Route Tampa temporarily increased the importance of Route Jackson. Together with the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the NLBG took on guard duties at the bridge.⁵⁶ Alpha Company was initially responsible for this task, while Charlie Company took over at the end of April.

Guard duties were conducted both on the bridge and in the surrounding area. 3 NLBG set up an observation post overlooking the bridge in the nearby Civil Defence Corps barracks. Alpha’s Quick Reaction Force was also stationed there, as was a medical evacuation team. Dutch infantry patrolled the bridge at varying times. Their Iraqi Civil Defence Corps colleagues guarded the area surrounding it. The battalion staff decided not to set up a fixed roadblock or checkpoint in order to avoid interfering with traffic too much. It was also thought that this would be “a fairly easy

target for attacks”.⁵⁷ Guarding the bridge nevertheless made the soldiers vulnerable. At the end of April, the battalion received intelligence that opponents wanting to kidnap Dutch personnel were aiming to do so at that location.⁵⁸

When Charlie Company took over the bridge from Alpha Company, the newly-responsible unit initiated a discussion on how to conduct its task. The company’s staff wanted to improve the protection of its own personnel by setting up one or more fortified positions. Battalion staff and company commanders discussed the proposal on Monday 10 May and rejected the idea. It was concluded that it would be better for personnel on the bridge to keep on the move. The consideration that traffic over the bridge should be delayed as little as possible also played a part in leaving the situation as it was.⁵⁹

An attack took place that very same evening. At about 10pm, two men on a motorcycle threw two hand grenades towards patrolling Dutch forces. A Lance Corporal and a Sergeant First Class were injured. The Sergeant died from his wounds a couple of hours later in the military field hospital at Camp Smitty.⁶⁰ He was the first fatality as a result of enemy action during an international operation by Dutch armed forces since 1995, when two Privates were killed in Bosnia. The Iraqi police were able to quickly round up the attackers, who were initially detained at the Dutch camp and subsequently handed over to the British authorities.⁶¹ An almost simultaneous attack on a Bravo Company patrol in Ar Rumaythah, just after 10 pm, resulted in no casualties.⁶²

At a staff meeting the day after the attack, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp emphasised the need to stay calm. He asserted that a tougher attitude towards Iraqis in general or a retreat behind armour and the ‘walls’ of the base camps would only play into the hands of their opponents.⁶³ “It is my intent,” the commander stated, “to keep the nature of NLBG’s operations largely unchanged”, in order to ensure that all “relationships, security and stability ... which have been built up over the past ten months” did not go to waste. However, Van Harskamp also expressed his aim to step up targeting operations against the leadership of the opposing forces.⁶⁴

In mid-May, the conflict between the Coalition and the Mahdi Army intensified throughout Southern Iraq. us troops had initiated an offensive to the north of Al Muthanna, in Karbala and Najaf, and had laid siege to the Mahdi Army in a number of towns. Heavy fighting aimed at eliminating the Sadrist positions was also taking place in Baghdad, in the British zone near Basra and in Maysan province. The untrained militia was no match for the international troops, who inflicted great losses on it. It was typical,

however, that the Mahdi Army often managed to retreat underground as quickly as it had reared its head. This made for an elusive opponent who was difficult to eliminate entirely.⁶⁵

The Sadr movement made another attempt to seize power in Al Muthanna on 14 and 15 May. On the afternoon of 14 May, after Friday prayers, a group of armed Al Sadr followers gathered at their party office in As Samawah. The group, comprising a few dozen men, carried AK-47s, RPG launchers and hand grenades and threatened to storm the Governor's compound. The NLBG provided support for the Iraqi police. The battalion reserve and FLT were deployed to protect government buildings. While Iraqi dignitaries and sheiks – led by the governor and the chief of police – attempted to negotiate and calm the situation, the Dutch prepared for an offensive action, just in case. The unrest continued throughout the evening. The Sadrists set up barricades. The gathering in the town dispersed only at nightfall, when small groups of armed men slipped off under the cover of darkness and fanned out over a wider area. Dutch patrols were subsequently and repeatedly fired upon. According to the NLBG, the Dutch found themselves in a situation “which was turning into a type of urban guerrilla warfare”.⁶⁶

The next day, the Sadrists continued to provoke unrest. The Iraqi authorities therefore decided to act against the party's headquarters. Governor Al Hassani requested assistance from the NLBG and the Dutch cordoned off what was known as the “Sadr House”. When militia members armed with Kalashnikovs threatened to use their guns against the Dutch soldiers, Special Forces snipers on nearby roofs countered the threat by firing their precision weapons at points close to the troublemakers to intimidate them. The Sadrists subsequently fled. The men succeeded in escaping because the Iraqi police let them pass. The cops were afraid to confront the Sadrists in a fight for fear of revenge.⁶⁷ Police forces occupied the Sadr movement's building after the Dutch military had searched it. Fighting in the town continued for the next few hours between police and Sadr militia. Also, there was a failed attempt by the Sadrists to recapture their party's offices, in which at least one of them was killed.⁶⁸

In spite of the fact that the Iraqi security services still had some failings, they were able to maintain control. They did not allow the situation in As Samawah to get out of hand as their colleagues had in the neighbouring province of Dhi Qar, where the Mahdi Army took temporary control of almost the whole of the city of Nasiriyah and most government buildings. The CPA there was forced to evacuate its personnel under fire to Tallil Airbase outside the town. Local administrators went into hiding and security services disintegrated. It took

the heavy guns from an AC-130 Spectre flying gunship to restore control. The situation had, however, got so out of hand that things would never be the same again. The CPA and Coalition Forces (in this case the Italians) did not recover until the start of Iraqi self-administration at the end of June.⁶⁹

There was no such escalation in Al Muthanna, although the situation was tense for several days after 15 May. Dutch military personnel, Iraqi police forces and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were repeatedly involved in shootings. One of the more serious incidents occurred in the early hours of 17 May. Insurgents attacked a Dutch military checkpoint on Route Jackson north of Ar Rumaythah, close to a small village near the provincial border. The roadblock was manned by a rifle section from Bravo Company. At 2am, the unit suddenly came under fire from behind a railway embankment. According to the section commander the “surprise attack” was “very intense”. Bullets and rocket-propelled grenades flew about. Their rapid return fire and, as they themselves admitted, “poor marksmanship” on the part of the attackers, ensured that no-one was hurt. The enemy fighters broke off the attack very quickly. Together with the Iraqi police a daylight search was later conducted of the houses in the neighbouring village. There the soldiers found grenades, ammunition and a plan of attack drawn in the sand.⁷⁰ Two privates, both gunners on the patrol’s vehicles, were later awarded the Cross of Merit for their bravery in returning fire from a vulnerable upright position, “in the midst of a hail of bullets”, and in doing so contributing to the repulsion of the attack.⁷¹

The ambush triggered a discussion among the Dutch on reinforcements in order to counter the threat which had evolved. The question was whether the 2003 decision to conduct the Iraq mission with light infantry and a ‘vulnerable’ open posture could still be justified. In consultation with the higher echelons in The Hague, the NLBG analysed the situation and put in a request for “extra armoured material” to provide better protection for the Dutch soldiers outside the camps, in particular against RPGs. “The material being used within NLBG [Mercedes Benz jeeps and Patria armoured vehicles] is not quite resistant to these,” Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp wrote with a feeling for understatement. More heavily armoured personnel carriers had already prevented casualties among Coalition Forces in neighbouring provinces. The NLBG commander requested the Defence Staff to provide him with YPR armoured tracked vehicles (an infantry fighting vehicle with 25mm rapid fire cannon, which at that time was allocated to armoured infantry battalions such as his) and a number of Leopard tanks. His unit already had sufficient numbers of trained crews.⁷²

Over the next few days, the threat remained high, but the general feeling within the Dutch unit that they were on the eve of an armed uprising proved to be unfounded. The most frequent incidents were minor clashes between the Iraqi police and armed groups, including a drive-by shooting which targeted the Sadr House occupied by police forces. There were no further major assaults, although Tallil Airbase suffered a rocket attack on 20 May in which two projectiles hit the base. On 27 May, a mortar attack targeted the Governor's compound in the centre of As Samawah. Of the three grenades two exploded, but no-one was hurt. The incident led Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp to refer in his daily report again to the "highly unpredictable nature" of the situation. He classified the actions by opposing forces as a "type of asymmetrical warfare".⁷³

On 21 May, the Dutch government announced that six AH-64 Apache combat helicopters would be deployed to Southern Iraq as soon as possible as reinforcements for the NLBG. A Ministry of Defence spokesperson told the media that the main reason was the "growing number of incidents".⁷⁴ An analysis by the Defence Staff had reached a different conclusion from that of the NLBG staff, namely that the requested extra armoured vehicles could be seen by the local population as too aggressive. More armour would deviate too much from the Dutch 'open approach' doctrine. It was decided to stick to the original plan, which had sometimes even been referred to as a 'Dutch approach'. The Defence Staff's argument was that the use of armoured vehicles, even tanks, might be counter-productive. Thanks to "their mobility, sensor systems and reaction speed", the Apaches would be better able to contribute "to assessing the security situation", and would therefore be better suited for the role of observation tool and airborne Quick Reaction Force.⁷⁵

"A highly welcome addition," the NLBG reported.⁷⁶ Additional facilities were set up at Tallil Airbase for the new weapons systems and their crews (about 100), like 'parking bays' for the aircraft, large maintenance tents and accommodation. The first three Apaches arrived on 27 May. Together with an accompanying Chinook (carrying technicians and security personnel), they made a remarkable four-day journey to Iraq hopping across Europe and the Middle East. The flying quartet flew from the Netherlands to Tallil under its own steam, with nine interim stops in seven countries.⁷⁷ The other three Apaches arrived in Southern Iraq in June.

At about 9am on 31 May, a car bomb (or Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device / VBIED in military jargon) exploded along Route Jackson in As Samawah, just as a US convoy was passing. The explosion caused no

damage or casualties among the Americans; one Iraqi civilian was injured. Dutch forces were dispatched to cordon off the site and investigate. The car in question, which contained the remains of dried-out, unexploded Iranian-made explosives, proved to come from Baghdad.⁷⁸ It was Al Muthanna's first encounter with a phenomenon that was already common in the guerrilla war against the Coalition elsewhere in Iraq. It would not be the last. A month later, two Dutch soft-top vehicles were also targeted by a VBIED on the same highway in neighbouring province Dhi Qar, not far from Tallil. The vehicles' high speed and poor timing by the bomber, as well as the fact that not all the explosives ignited, prevented any damage or casualties.⁷⁹ "Another guardian angel used up," Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp commented in a report.⁸⁰

Although the threat from irregular warfare appeared to increase as a result of the IED attacks, the unrest in fact dissipated over the next few weeks. The reason for this was negotiations with the Sadr movement which culminated in a nationwide ceasefire.⁸¹ In Al Muthanna, 3 NLBG resumed its *modus operandi* from before the uprising. The month of June was dominated by the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis and the formal end of occupation. An interim government, led by Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, was installed in anticipation of general elections in January 2005. One of its first decisions, now that it was responsible for national security, was to 'upgrade' the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps to form the Iraqi National Guard (ING).

At the request of the new interim government, the international troops remained active in Iraq and were officially renamed the Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I), or MNF. The force's mandate was laid down in UN Security Council Resolution 1546 of 8 June 2004. The old occupation army entered into a "security partnership" with the new Iraqi authorities. The precise agreements were contained in an exchange of letters between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Prime Minister Allawi, included as an annex to the UN resolution. This extended the authorisation for the existing international forces, as initially formulated in Resolution 1511 of October 2003. The MNF would continue to conduct operations to create a secure environment, would continue to assist reconstruction activities, and would continue to help build up effective Iraqi security services.

One shadow on the way to Iraqi self-government in Al Muthanna was the news that governor Al Hassani, doubts regarding whose integrity had circulated for many months, was officially accused of corruption. The judicial authorities in Baghdad had apparently started an investigation. 3 NLBG suspected that the inquiry was motivated by political rivalry. Plausibly, the accusations had been instigated by former governor Sheikh Sami, who was still an influential figure

in the province and, having failed to obtain a ministerial post in the interim government, was now trying to create a political crisis that would enable him to return to Al Muthanna.⁸² The crisis passed, however. Al Hassani remained governor, and would hold that position until his violent death in a roadside bomb explosion in August 2007.⁸³

The Dutch contingent was initially to remain in Al Muthanna until just after the transfer of sovereignty. On 11 June, however, the Dutch government announced that it wished to extend the mission by eight months, until after the crucial Iraqi national elections of January 2005. A fourth Dutch battle group took over the security task from 3 NLBG in July. By then, Iraqi self-governance was already in place. CPA shadow governor Jim Soriano and his people stopped their work on 20 June and departed without much ado.⁸⁴ On 28 June, CPA chief Paul Bremer officially transferred sovereignty to the Iraqi interim government. The unexpectedly early handover had been prepared in the utmost secrecy.⁸⁵ The international force, including the Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna, was just as surprised as everyone else. 3 NLBG heard the news via the media.⁸⁶ The transfer passed off peacefully though. The new Iraqi President, Ghazi al Yawar, spoke of “a historic day, a happy day, a day to which all Iraqis have looked forward”.⁸⁷ But while the occupation of Iraq may have been over, this could not be said of the country’s many problems.

The second uprising

Following a brief ceremony on 14 July 2004, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp handed over command of Dutch operations in Al Muthanna to Lieutenant Colonel Kees Matthijssen of 4 NLBG. Matthijssen was commander of 13 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (*Stoottroepen Prins Bernhard* Regiment), the battalion which formed the core of the new battle group. Like its predecessor, the fourth battle group had an Alpha Company in As Samawah, a Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah and a Charlie Company in Al Khidr, all air assault infantry units. At Camp Smitty, there was also a ‘staff and heavy weapons company’ typical of air assault battalions. Alongside the regular battalion staff and combat service support elements, it encompassed a number of operational units for use by battalion command, such as reconnaissance teams and two anti-tank platoons. A mortar platoon had been added. In practice, in Al Muthanna the latter sub-units acted mainly as infantry forces, providing security at the base camp and for the logistic convoys, as well as battalion reserve.⁸⁸ In the first few weeks, the new NLBG had every opportunity to become

accustomed to its so-called normal framework operations and, as the unit itself said, “to shake out their feathers”. The situation was calm and local support for the Dutch military presence seemed to be as strong as ever. On 22 July, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen gathered his staff and subordinate commanders to “establish the direction of the operation”. The main focus, he reported, “is security assistance, which I see as being twofold, i.e. on the one hand assisting upon request and on the other the further improvement and professionalisation of the Iraqi security services”. In this sense, the unit planned to operate in the same way as 3 NLBG. Now that the Iraqis were officially in charge, it was up to them. In line with the guidelines laid down by the higher MNF headquarters, the Dutch operated in the background and as much as possible outside urban areas.⁸⁹

The Apache attack helicopters, known as Copperheads, conducted reconnaissance flights (including along the border area with Saudi Arabia) and were on standby as an airborne Quick Reaction Force. From Tallil, a section of two Apaches could be in the Dutch sector in about 30 minutes, depending on where they needed to provide aid or bare their teeth.⁹⁰ The pilots regularly practised close combat attack procedures with the infantry companies’ forward air controllers. 4 NLBG also deployed the Apaches at night to observe roads or the environs of the base camps and around temporary checkpoints. Escorting convoys and transport helicopter flights was among their tasks as well.

The new phase of Iraqi self-governance meant that 4 NLBG operated in an essentially different environment from its three predecessors. Of course there was a downside. There was a strong impression that the new Dutch contingent had less situational awareness from the start. After a few weeks in the area, NLBG commander Matthijssen reported that his unit’s information position had changed. He initially attributed this to the reduced presence of his infantry in the towns, which meant less contact with locals and therefore also less intelligence. “The return of the CIMIC Support Element and the FLT detachment to Camp Smitty, following the closure of the CPA building” in As Samawah had also led to less situational awareness.⁹¹ In previous months, it had mostly been personnel from these units who had kept abreast of local feeling on behalf of the battle group.

During the period of CPA administration there had been “relatively in-depth insight into governmental developments”. The newly independent Iraqi authorities were less open in this respect.⁹² This was a disadvantage because “below the surface there are intelligence-related developments which I do not believe to be new but which do deserve attention,” Matthijssen stated on 25

July. From the moment the Iraqis took charge, there were perceived ‘winners and losers’ with respect to the spoils of power and this created considerable tensions. Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen observed signs of friction between administrators, the police and the tribes, and dissatisfaction among locals with the “poor transparency of [the] government organisation”, which led to “a perception of corruption”. There were also “signs of Iranian influence, the presence of unknown foreigners, new political parties, indications of terror-related organisations and trafficking”.⁹³

In the meantime, the crisis with Muqtada al Sadr and his movement, although temporarily on hold, was far from resolved. In June, Al Sadr made it clear that he rejected the national interim government in Baghdad. It had been “put in place by the occupier” and in his view was therefore illegitimate. That summer, all eyes turned towards Najaf, where the Mahdi Army challenged the new Iraqi authorities and the traditional Shiite leadership by bringing in large numbers of arms – provided by Iran – and taking over whole districts. The Sadrist dug themselves in around the Imam Ali mosque and occupied what was known as the Valley of Peace, a large cemetery of religious significance on the edge of the town.

This renewal of the power struggle slowly escalated into a new uprising, which spread across the whole of Southern Iraq. At the start of August, the MNF placed a cordon around Najaf and Iraqi police started to round up Al Sadr followers. The Mahdi Army responded by kidnapping police officers and attacking police stations. Violence erupted on 5 and 6 August, first in Najaf, and later in other towns. Hundreds of Mahdi Army fighters were killed, as were personnel from the Iraqi security forces, innocent civilians and military personnel from the MNF.⁹⁴

In Al Muthanna, these developments led more or less to a repetition of the events that had occurred in April and May. Dutch intelligence personnel observed that powerful stakeholders, such as tribal leaders, put pressure on local Sadrists to keep them in order.⁹⁵ This was only partially successful, however. Attacks occurred again. It was noticeable that the Iraqi police and National Guard were now being targeted more frequently than the Dutch troops. In order to keep an eye on the Mahdi Army throughout the province, 4 NLBG concentrated its patrols on the major highways towards Najaf and supported the local authorities by jointly manning police and National Guard checkpoints.⁹⁶ One such post near Al Khidr came under mortar fire on the night of 6 August. A policeman was injured and the perpetrators escaped, in spite of a search by two Dutch Apache helicopters.⁹⁷

Next was the capital As Samawah. In the early hours of Sunday 8 August, shots could be heard over a period of three hours. It all started at about 1am, when various Iraqi security forces' buildings were fired upon using small arms and RPGs. A policeman was injured when three police cars were also ambushed. One of the vehicles was hit by an RPG. Three mortar grenades landed near the television masts during the fighting, but caused no damage or casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen reported that the Iraqi police tackled the issue "decisively". Seventeen people were arrested.⁹⁸

The NLBG commander also reported that the incidents surprised him somewhat. In the days prior to the fighting, everything had pointed to the Iraqis in Al Muthanna being appalled by the Sadrists' conduct in Najaf. Mathijssen speculated that one possible reason for the sudden outburst of violence could be "the fact that they [the Sadr followers in Al Muthanna] had been called upon to contribute to the current campaign [by the Mahdi Army throughout Southern Iraq]". Within the wider picture, it was thought possible that the leader of the local Sadr movement, Sheik Ghazi al Zargani, had given the more radical section of his party a free rein. It could also "not be ruled out that the majority [of the perpetrators] came from outside".⁹⁹ Police Chief Kareem let it be known that his information pointed to most of those arrested being from As Zubayah, near Basra.¹⁰⁰ This moving about of Sadr militia was common. Many fighters from Al Muthanna had in turn been deployed in the major conflict against the MNF near Najaf, which the Mahdi Army viewed as the centre of gravity of its campaign. The Sadrists used reinforcements from elsewhere for operations in As Samawah or Ar Rumaythah.

The decisive operations by Iraqi police which so impressed Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen continued throughout the next day and night. NLBG's Alpha Company provided support during a police operation in As Samawah, in which "a number of districts" were combed, houses were searched and suspects arrested. The total number of detained troublemakers was 26. The operation continued until dawn on Monday 9 August. A large number of Dutch troops were also operating off-base and Apaches conducted flights over the area, as there were indications of planned mortar attacks. It stayed calm that night, possibly due to the security measures of the NLBG.¹⁰¹ Yet there was an attack the next night. Three mortar grenades were fired at the Japanese base camp.¹⁰² Just over 24 hours later, two mortar rounds landed close to Camp Smitty.¹⁰³

Ambush in Ar Rumaythah

Gunfights between the Sadrists and the Iraqi security forces continued over the next few days.¹⁰⁴ In Al Khidr, too, the atmosphere was tense. On Friday 13 August, triggered by the crisis in Najaf, a large and emotionally-charged demonstration took place against the Iraqi interim government and Coalition Forces. An aggressive crowd threw stones at passing Dutch units, and elsewhere people displayed the soles of their feet (an insult) and some made cut-throat motions.¹⁰⁵ Similar demonstrations were also held in Ar Rumaythah. The leader of the Sadr movement in that town, Fadhil Ashaara, again played a crucial role.

On the evening of Tuesday 10 August, a Bravo Company patrol reported being under fire in the centre of Ar Rumaythah. In the darkness, the Dutch soldiers thought the shots had come from a slow-moving truck, which later proved to have broken down and was being pushed by a few armed guards from the law courts (including three policemen) who had come to the aid of the driver. The return fire from the Dutch unit wounded the truck driver in his cabin. The incident incurred the wrath of the local police commander, who accused the Dutch infantry of having fired first and without reason.¹⁰⁶ This rapid passing of judgement was illustrative of the bad working relationship between the leadership of the Iraqi police and the Dutch, in particular the detachment of 'green MPS' and the commander responsible for Bravo Company. The Dutch commanding officer in Ar Rumaythah, for his part, was furious with the police commissioner for the rapid, public denouncement of his troops and decided to sort things out at the police station. Harsh words were said during that confrontation.¹⁰⁷

Shortly afterwards, the 'blue MPS', as was usual, investigated the incident. On 11 and 12 August they discovered evidence ("traces of ricocheted bullets" in a wall) that the Dutch patrol had indeed been fired at, but from a different direction than it had thought.¹⁰⁸ A witness, the nightwatchman at a nearby school, was to be questioned on Saturday 14 August. The man's name and address were unknown to the MPS, which led to a decision on Saturday afternoon to pay a spontaneous visit to the school that evening, on the assumption that the man would then be at work.¹⁰⁹ Late that evening the Dutch military police drove from Camp Smitty to Ar Rumaythah in three jeeps (containing six MPS and an interpreter). In doing so, the team drove into an ambush, the most serious attack directed against Dutch troops in their twenty months in Iraq.

The assault took place at about 11.30 pm when the military police team set out to return to As Samawah, after having held several conversations

at the school in the centre of Ar Rumaythah. They did not get to talk to the nightwatchman, as he was not on duty. In order to return to the highway towards As Samawah (Route Jackson), which ran more or less through the south-westerly part of the town, the three Dutch vehicles had to drive through the town and cross a river and railway line. Once they had crossed the bridge over the river, the team noticed that the streets were suddenly empty of people. The unit came under fire shortly afterwards. The vehicles were shot at over a distance of several hundred metres from buildings on both sides of the road, until they reached the highway. The drivers of the vehicles, two of whom had almost immediately been hit by bullets, continued to drive at full speed in line with standard operating procedure until they were about two kilometres outside the town, where they stopped. The driver of the first vehicle had a bullet in his side, the other a graze wound in his leg. The passenger in the second vehicle, a 29-year-old Sergeant, showed no signs of life. The team members assumed he had been hit right at the start of the ambush and killed instantly.¹¹⁰

The fight was not yet over. Bravo Company sent two Quick Reaction Force teams to the aid of the military police personnel. At that time, company command still assumed that it had been an opportunist shooting, a rather common occurrence, and not a wide-scale, planned ambush.¹¹¹ However, the two QRF teams also came under heavy fire from rooftops and from between houses in the same part of town. Two soldiers were injured in the second QRF team's second vehicle, an open all-terrain jeep. The unit also lost one of its vehicles completely. Two anti-tank grenades hit it and brought it to a standstill. The four occupants, three of whom were injured, hid in a nearby garden. They spent over 45 minutes in 'enemy territory', until they were rescued and taken to safety by another unit with two Patria armoured vehicles, sent especially by the Bravo Company command post to find them.¹¹² Twenty minutes before – it was by now 1am and over 90 minutes since the start of the battle – two alerted Apaches had appeared above the town. This was the moment at which the insurgents gave up. A medical evacuation helicopter, a US Blackhawk, picked up those who had been wounded from the meeting point outside town and took them to Camp Smitty. The remaining troops drove to Bravo Company's camp via a detour.¹¹³

NLBG commander Matthijssen evaluated the actions of the rebels the next day as "well-organised ambushes".¹¹⁴ 4 NLBG concluded that it must have been a planned attack. This was due to the size of the enemy forces (a few dozen) and the fact that they had positioned themselves around the few unavoidable thoroughfares to the highway (chokepoints in military jargon).

Moreover, the enemy's equipment (small-calibre weapons, machine guns and RPGs) was well placed along the length of the routes and on both sides.

The NLBG had been caught by surprise. Sections of the population in Ar Rumaythah must have known about the attack and its precise location and preparations. The same applied to the local authorities, including the security services, with whom the Dutch thought they maintained good relations.¹¹⁵ In the wake of the ambush, two questions needed to be answered. Firstly, why had 4 NLBG failed to see such a major attack coming and specifically failed to translate known intelligence – including the arrival of an armed group in Ar Rumaythah in the preceding days and warnings by a tribal leader – into preventive security measures? In the Netherlands, media reports alleged that the Dutch had been naive to allow the military police team to go to Ar Rumaythah in unarmoured vehicles, without infantry protection and in the dark, at the time of such a widespread and violent crisis in the Shiite south.¹¹⁶

Secondly, how had a small, radical minority been able to play such a dominant role? For months, Iraqi self-regulation had kept Al Muthanna the safest province in the whole of Iraq. During the provincial security council's meeting on 16 August, governor Al Hassani reported that the police forces had been threatened and intimidated. He claimed that the instigator of the violence came from Nasiriyah. The Iraqi authorities had by this point lost the decisiveness that NLBG commander Matthijssen had admired earlier. Fear and indecision all of a sudden pervaded both the security service ranks and the civilian authorities.

Some light was shed on the incident by the company commander in Al Khidr. In the days following it, he maintained that "hardliners" in particular made use of a widespread sense of dissatisfaction among the population, arising "from a lack of job opportunities and the primary necessities of life".¹¹⁷ In Al Khidr, there had for months been major problems with the water supply and the Iraqis viewed the local council as corrupt and incompetent.¹¹⁸ The entire province was also still struggling to cope with erratic fuel supplies. This had consequences for the Dutch military who, after all, were there to provide support for the distrusted Iraqi interim authorities. The people had lost faith in their government. As Charlie Company reported, in Al Khidr the Dutch were not quite (or not yet) equated with the Americans, but the town had definitely become "anti-SFIR".¹¹⁹ In the week before the fighting, there had been signs of an armed operation against Dutch military personnel in Al Khidr also and Charlie Company personnel had been warned not to go into the town any more.¹²⁰

In addition to dissatisfaction with the authorities and high unemployment, combined with a tradition of resistance, the specific position of Ar Rumaythah close to the troubled provinces of Najaf and Al Qadisiyah also played a part. The Mahdi Army enjoyed the support of fellow radicals from Diwaniyah, north of Ar Rumaythah.¹²¹ At the same time, it quickly became clear that the Iraqi authorities badly wanted to believe that the violence came from outside the province¹²², but disguised the fact that the Sadrists in Ar Rumaythah did in fact possess solid local support. This support arose from a mixture of ideology, dissatisfaction and the pursuit of financial gain. Sadrist leader Fadhil Ashaara had gathered a core of radicals. He paid unemployed men as well as opportunist petty criminals 400 dollars a month to act as foot soldiers for his movement. Many of these men also worked in the FPS. Furthermore, Ashaara had almost all of the town's cops on his 'payroll'. The money for this corruption came from Iran.¹²³

In response to the ambush, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen decided temporarily to reduce the number of Dutch patrols in the towns.¹²⁴ He did so partly at the request of the governor, who seemed to have lost control of Ar Rumaythah (his own tribal homeland) and of the southern districts of As Samawah (formerly controlled by his 'own' police forces).¹²⁵ Prior to this decision, the staff of 4 NLBG held urgent discussions on how to respond to the challenges. A number of key officials argued in favour of more robust action in order to get the situation under control. To this end, local authorities such as the police chief of Ar Rumaythah and provincial governor Al Hassani would expressly be held to account, and daytime and nighttime patrols in the towns ought to be intensified. Tough countermeasures such as cordon and search operations would have to be considered. The NLBG had to act tough and make it clear to the Iraqis that the Dutch were not 'white chickens' (local parlance for cowards).¹²⁶ To achieve this, the staff wanted additional forces from the Netherlands.

The main question was whether to show restraint or to surge forward. In the end, the former option was chosen, mainly because Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen thought that "adopting a dominant role in the towns was contrary to the post-28 June MNF strategy". At this stage, the 4 NLBG commander had insufficient intelligence for targeting operations.¹²⁷ Moreover, as it was "painfully obvious that the intelligence capacity was unsatisfactory", the battle group staff introduced measures to improve information collection and analysis. One lesson learned from the Ar Rumaythah ambush was that the NLBG had indeed received snippets of

intelligence, but that these had been too vague for them to be able to be acted upon. 4 NLBG felt as if it had been more or less blind.¹²⁸

The intent was to conduct operations in Al Muthanna using improved intelligence. To this end, 4 NLBG was allocated additional support from the Netherlands: from the military intelligence service MIVD, the Army Special Forces Regiment and the tactical intelligence unit 103 ISTAR Battalion. Commandos and recon personnel were deployed more frequently at night in particular in order to maintain situational awareness. In consultation with the Defence Staff, the battle group was also reinforced by two extra infantry platoons.¹²⁹ From the start, 4 NLBG had had less combat power than 3 NLBG, as an air assault battalion typically is smaller than an armoured infantry battalion. This was now 'put right'.

Ceasefire

The security situation remained precarious for several weeks. During this period, the town of Ar Rumaythah and also a number of southern districts in As Samawah were very much under the influence of the Sadr militias.¹³⁰ The Dutch, by choice of their commander, stayed well away from these areas. Yet they could not entirely avoid the enemy and occasionally ended up in gunfights. On the evening of Monday 16 August, for instance, a Bravo Company patrol came across two men preparing a firing position outside Ar Rumaythah. The Dutch briefly exchanged fire with the insurgents, after which the latter succeeded in escaping. A couple of hours later, the company base camp near the town came under mortar attack. That same night, two severe firefights erupted in As Samawah near the PJCC and three heavy explosions were heard as well, probably from mortar strikes.¹³¹

Two days later, an Alpha Company patrol was involved in a peculiar incident near Camp Smitty. While personnel in two stationary Dutch jeeps were observing the area, a white Toyota approached them from the front. The driver stopped and flashed his headlights, then switched on the hazard lights and sounded his horn. He did so next to the two Dutch vehicles. He then drove off and stopped at a nearby Iraqi police checkpoint. After a few minutes, the vehicle turned and drove towards the Dutch patrol at high speed with the headlights on full. Shots were fired. In line with the Rules of Engagement, the Dutch soldiers opened fire. Both the car's occupants were killed. An investigation by the Iraqi authorities and Dutch military police showed that the two had been drinking alcohol, which possibly explained their behaviour. The Dutch, who thought they had been fired

upon from the vehicle, found no weapons. The shots had been fired at and from the Iraqi police checkpoint.¹³²

In general, provocations by the Mahdi Army at this time were limited to firing at the international troops' base camps. On the night of Monday 23 August, the Sadrist militia fired five mortar rounds at the Japanese compound. Another attack followed the next night. On the evening of 27 August, Bravo Company's camp near Ar Rumaythah was again targeted. Three mortar rounds landed one hundred metres south of the base.¹³³ Enemy operations were otherwise mainly aimed at the Iraqi security forces. Among the incidents were a gun battle at the ING battalion's barracks in As Samawah on 24 August and an ambush of an Iraqi police patrol in which three cops were injured, two of them seriously, on 28 August.¹³⁴ In general, de Sadrists controlled large parts of the towns, and thus the population.

Only when the crisis in Najaf had been resolved did calm return to Al Muthanna. Following an absence of several weeks due to a heart operation in the UK, Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani used his authority to bring about a compromise between the Iraqi interim government and Muqtada al Sadr. He orchestrated a ceasefire, starting on the evening of 26 August, and took over the disputed holy sites in Najaf from the Mahdi Army. All the parties – the Iraqi government, the MNF and the Sadrists – withdrew their troops. For the time being, Al Sadr opted for a political solution and called on his followers outside Najaf to observe the ceasefire too. The crisis passed, but the underlying power struggle continued. Whether it would be settled non-violently would have to become clear in the run-up to the general elections over the coming months.

In any case, the situation in Al Muthanna stabilised to such an extent that 4 NLBG resumed normal framework operations from the end of August. The Dutch forces also renewed their efforts in support of the Iraqi security services, with courses for trainers and officers, joint patrols, intensive coaching, the creation of a police training centre and joint exercises. The Sadr uprising had demonstrated that the Iraqi security forces were still unable to operate independently.¹³⁵ This process would be most troublesome in Ar Rumaythah. Relations with the local police there had become severely disrupted. The police corps had obviously been infiltrated. There were suspicions that policemen had been involved in the ambush against the Dutch, or had at least been guilty of serious negligence. "It is really essential that a large section of the I[raqi] P[olice] in Ar Rumaythah be replaced," Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen concluded.¹³⁶

As a breeding ground for guerrilla activity, Ar Rumaythah remained

the province's 'problem child'. The truce with the Mahdi Army had positive effects, but there were still plenty of radicals and criminals who intended to undermine the authorities and drive out the Dutch troops. ⁴ NLBG therefore remained on the alert. There were certain areas where the Dutch infantry were still not conducting patrols.¹³⁷ An additional complicating factor was the power struggle within the local Albu Hassan tribe, to which governor Al Hassani belonged and which back in April had proved to be a useful instrument in suppressing the unrest. A fight for control between two of the sheikhs for the 'top job' caused part of the tribe to side with the Sadrists and there were even plans to assassinate fellow tribesman Al Hassani.¹³⁸ The situation weakened the governor's position to the extent that he adopted a passive stance, and in doing so he alienated the severely beleaguered provincial police force (and in particular Police Chief Kareem) which sought Al Hassani's support in its time of need.

On Sunday 5 September, the NLBG hit back with a major cordon and search operation. Codenamed Kyodo, its aim was to arrest suspected insurgents in Ar Rumaythah. On the basis of apparently reliable information from the governor and a few dissident tribe members, Dutch military personnel targeted two locations and rounded up eight people suspected of involvement in the ambush of 14 and 15 August. A British Chinook helicopter dropped the Dutch Special Forces' arrest team close to the two locations. It arrested three men at the first house, and another five at the second ten minutes later. The operators found firearms and ammunition and confiscated documents.¹³⁹ As always, the British took over the suspects and initiated an investigation together with the Iraqi judiciary.¹⁴⁰ Unfortunately for the Dutch, who were quite certain they had captured the culprits, the allies had to release all eight men a few weeks later due to a lack of evidence.¹⁴¹

The enemy was quick to respond. On the evening of 11 September, a Field Liaison Team of Special Forces narrowly escaped an attack in As Samawah. As they were leaving a meeting with representatives of a political party, a hand grenade was thrown through an open window of their vehicle, but it failed to explode. Subsequent examination by experts from the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Service showed that the grenade had not detonated because the safety pin had broken off. If the grenade had exploded in the vehicle – containing four Dutch soldiers and an Iraqi interpreter – there would certainly have been casualties.¹⁴²

In October, in the area around Ar Rumaythah, there was a short-lived IED threat as well, which died down as quickly as it had arisen. Dutch military personnel experienced two close calls. At about midday on

Saturday 2 October, a roadside bomb exploded near a Dutch jeep which was driving in the direction of As Samawah together with two other vehicles. The location was about five kilometres south of Ar Rumaythah, where two other IEDs had been discovered and disarmed by the Iraqi police the day before.¹⁴³ Five days later, on 7 October, an IED exploded as a logistics convoy returned to As Samawah after bringing supplies to the Bravo Company. It went off next to a tanker truck. The vehicle was “perforated in multiple places by a large number of steel bullets”. A Sergeant who had been manning the roof-top machine gun sustained injuries to his left arm and leg.¹⁴⁴ As the IED attacks were not repeated, they were interpreted by 4 NLBG as warnings from the perpetrators of the ambush of 14-15 August to stay away, as a response to the cordon and search Operation Kyodo.

Complex crisis response operations

In the course of 2004, the NLBG in Al Muthanna was twice confronted with the sideshow of a full-blown insurgency. Armed resistance against the Coalition went hand in hand with a violent internal power struggle within the Shiite community that was subject to a high level of interference from criminal organisations. The resistance against Coalition Forces was strongly linked to a conflict of interests among several armed political groups, in which tribal relations also played a part. In this respect, for all his inciting nationalist and anti-American rhetoric, Muqtada al Sadr was above all leading an inwardly-focused, revolutionary movement of the young, impoverished Shiite urban proletariat. In order to overthrow the established power bases within the Shia community, his party twice entered into conflict with the international forces which protected his opponents. By attacking the international troops, Al Sadr hoped to mobilise the disgruntled masses. He was only partly successful. Moreover, it was a battle that he could not win militarily. At the cost of hundreds of lives, the insurgent leader was ultimately forced to adopt different strategies.

Only after much hesitation was the hybrid, violent situation of guerrilla, terror and political violence recognised by the Coalition for what it was: an armed uprising, or insurgency.¹⁴⁵ The Coalition’s military leaders and planners gradually came to accept that operations to counter it should therefore ideally be in line with the principles of a counter-insurgency campaign. In spite of the relative calm in the ‘atypical’ province of Al Muthanna, where the armed uprising barely got off the ground due to

specific local conditions, Dutch troops also encountered irregular attacks aimed at themselves and at the authorities that they supported (initially the CPA, later the Iraqi security forces and government institutions). Never, though, did the Dutch need to adopt a deliberate counter-insurgency strategy. The situation in Al Muthanna hardly required one.

The Dutch armed forces' fairly broad experience in peace support operations did, however, result in tactical reflexes that matched quite well with some of the central tenets of counter-insurgency, such as a population-centric approach. Dutch military personnel came to realise that they could benefit from the guidelines and principles on countering irregular warfare. By chance, a new Army manual on this subject had just been published the previous year.¹⁴⁶ Thus there seemed to be a mix of peace support and counter-insurgency tactics being adopted by improvisation. The main priority was to obtain and retain the support of the local population, for instance by showing restraint in the use of force and by demonstrating an 'open attitude'. Another priority tactic was to put Iraqi security forces in the lead. The Dutch nevertheless realised that they held a precarious grip over a wary and suspicious population, and therefore lost situational awareness very rapidly after the change-over to Iraqi self-governance. The Coalition strategy of standing down and pulling back did not help either.

In the type of complex operational environment the Dutch experienced, actions were steered by intelligence. The gathering, processing and analysis of large amounts of information were therefore of immense importance, even more so than during previous military operations.¹⁴⁷ This was initially insufficiently acknowledged and the NLBG particularly lacked proper analytical capability and satisfactory internal communications on intelligence. This had in fact been the case since 2 NLBG, not least due to an increasingly passive stance from the Iraqis themselves, both the authorities and the population. This process was exacerbated by the transition to Iraqi self-governance in June 2004. Only after a restructuring of internal NLBG intelligence processes in September did matters improve.

Over the course of 2004, these developments and shifts in emphasis led to operations by the NLBGs acquiring some characteristics of a counter-insurgency, or what in colonial times used to be called a 'pacification campaign'. The specific conditions in Al Muthanna made this less dramatic than it sounds. It was and remained remarkably peaceful in the Dutch sector compared to the rest of Iraq.¹⁴⁸ But the operations could clearly no longer be considered as a peace operation. Until 28 June 2004, the Dutch battle group was in fact part of an occupation army, which met with

robust armed resistance. After that date, it was part of a multinational stabilisation force supporting the government of a country taken to the brink of civil war by a violent, internal power struggle and sectarian strife.

6

Reconstruction

The faltering 'project machine'

The ambush in Ar Rumaythah in which one Dutchman was killed and six colleagues were wounded came as shock to the Netherlands' forces in Iraq. "Even we, the Dutch, could be targeted in spite of our 'Dutch approach'," Army chaplain Major René Heinrichs contemplated. "Once again we started to ask ourselves what we were really doing in Iraq: wasn't this supposed to be a peacekeeping operation?"¹ Back in the Netherlands, the response was even more emotional. Above all there was surprise, with a vocal homefront that did not shy away from making pointed remarks in the media and on internet forums.² "The Dutch were never part of the occupying force, but in view of the attacks and the lack of warnings from the locals, they are now indeed seen as the enemy," journalist Joeri Boom wrote. A year before, he had experienced a completely different, positive mood during patrols with the Marines.³ Boom's analysis may have painted a somewhat simplified picture, but he did have a point when he claimed that the attack highlighted the distance between the Dutch military and a significant part of Al Muthanna's population.

One factor which seemed to contribute to the growing gap between the Dutch and the Iraqis was the reduction in funds which the NLBG could spend to improve the living conditions of the local population. This decline had been going on for several months. The 'project machine', which at the start of 2004 had been operating at full capacity using many millions of us dollars from Coalition funds, began to falter in the course of the spring as the CPA reduced the flow. Less and less did the Iraqis see 'the Dutch flag flying' over a renovated school or medical post, and the NLBG commander

was no longer able to cut ribbons every week for the local media's cameras. This prospect greatly concerned Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp of 3 NLBG when he took up his post in March 2004. In addition to intelligence gathering and normal framework (security) operations, his predecessors had stressed that CIMIC was one of the pillars of Dutch military success in Al Muthanna.

The dwindling flow of funds was linked to the imminent end of the occupation and the transfer to Iraqi self-governance, which meant the end of the highly-successful Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP). This fund, placed under military control, was used by the NLBG to pay for the majority of its projects. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp foresaw major problems in particular for his successors and therefore deliberately raised the matter with the Defence Staff. His analysis: the people of Al Muthanna linked the legitimacy of the Dutch presence directly with the tangible results of the aid projects. The shortfall therefore needed to be compensated for. This could be achieved by substantially increasing the Dutch CIMIC fund from the 'paltry' 50,000 euros per four-monthly rotation to the equivalent of 500,000 to 750,000 us dollars *per month*. As long as Dutch troops continued to achieve civil reconstruction projects, the Iraqis would remain positive about their presence, the Lieutenant Colonel reasoned. He warned that this stance could change if the aid ceased.⁴

The Defence Staff did not agree. The difference in insight between the Dutch strategic level in The Hague and the tactical command in Iraq raised a number of important questions on the nature of the Dutch operation. To what extent was the relative success of the Dutch in Al Muthanna based on reconstruction and development projects, what position did this task occupy in the operation as a whole and what was the actual scale of this effort? Did CIMIC serve purely to ensure the security of the Dutch troops, as Van Harskamp – in line with the doctrine – stressed in his appeal to the Defence Staff, or were more structural reconstruction and support of the government also taking place? What was the relationship between CIMIC and the other reconstruction task, that of reconstructing and reforming the Iraqi security sector?

The cost of the Dutch operation in Iraq was approaching 100 million euros and no big fuss had been made about deploying additional resources such as the Special Forces company in December 2003 or the Apache attack helicopters in May 2004 – all presented to the Dutch Parliament as necessary means of self-protection.⁵ If CIMIC projects were indeed that important as well, why was The Hague being so reticent in allocating funds?

Civil-Military Cooperation in theory

“Toward Iraq with troops and cash” was the front page headline in *NRC Handelsblad* on 28 July 2003. The article was about a press conference a few days before the first Dutch battle group became operational in Al Muthanna. Iraqi journalists had had just one question for Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman: “Will the Dutch be implementing projects in the province?” The commander replied that he had brought money. After the press conference, however, he confessed to Dutch journalists that the budget was only 50,000 euros. The real money for reconstruction was held by the CPA and not by him.⁶ In saying so, the first battle group commander was publicly citing the official Dutch government stance, that, from the arrival of the Dutch and the CPA’s new provincial administrator (Bulmer), civil and military (security) tasks were to be kept strictly separate. Swijgman personally felt that he had been sent to Iraq with an empty wallet, however. He saw little benefit in the intention of the senior leadership to separate security tasks and administrative and construction tasks for political reasons. He wished to do more than just Quick Impact Projects (QIPS), short-term initiatives aimed merely at creating goodwill.⁷

The CIMIC budget for Al Muthanna was small compared to previous international operations. It was therefore logical that the tactical commanders in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 should wonder why The Hague was keeping a tight rein on the purse strings.⁸ There were two basic assumptions affecting Dutch parsimony in Al Muthanna. The newly-appointed CPA Governorate Coordinator and his staff were supposed to take on the package of civilian tasks, and under these circumstances CIMIC could and would be conducted ‘according to the rules’. The first assumption was connected to the political desire to distance the Dutch military contribution from the occupation. The second was dogmatic. In order to prevent too great an overlap between the civil and military dimensions in peace support operations, the Netherlands – in line with NATO’s doctrine – approached interaction between military personnel and their civilian environment mainly as an instrument to serve a military objective: to create security. This was about force acceptance, the chief objective being force protection. Where possible, military personnel were to coordinate their activities with local civilian authorities and IGOs and NGOs. Reconstruction or state building was to be avoided.

This stance was not held just by Defence, but was also encouraged by the Department of Development Cooperation, part of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. It was the latter department which provided the funds for the Dutch CIMIC budget. Traditionally, it had major policy-driven reservations regarding the role of military personnel in humanitarian aid and reconstruction. This stance was reinforced by the protectionist attitude of the NGO community – the department’s largest group of partner organisations – which opposed military involvement in the “humanitarian space”.⁹ The result was a compromise, officially summarised in what was known as the 2003 CIMIC policy framework under the motto “as civil as possible and as military as necessary”.¹⁰ In spite of the flexibility this phrase seemed to offer, the Netherlands aimed to keep its military role in the civil domain to the absolute minimum. This was demonstrated once again at the end of August 2003 when, following critical questions in Parliament about the paltry CIMIC budget for Al Muthanna, Ministers De Hoop Scheffer and Kamp stressed repeatedly “that military personnel are not aid workers”. Therefore, no substantial budget increase was granted.¹¹

It was well-known at the time that international civilian organisations were barely operational in Iraq – and certainly not in the peripheral province of Al Muthanna – and that both the CPA and the local authorities were dysfunctional. The Dutch battle group was nevertheless explicitly requested by the Defence Staff in The Hague not to become too involved in supporting CIMIC activities.¹² The Dutch military CIMIC personnel who trained for Iraq from the late summer of 2003 had it impressed upon them that CIMIC was not to be a ‘project machine’. CIMIC staff received no training in tendering out and supervising projects, because military personnel ought not to be “Santa Claus in fatigues”.¹³

Civil-Military Cooperation in practice

The financial shortfall anticipated by Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman did not occur during his period of command. On 6 August, the Dutch representative at CPA-South, Major Kortenhoeven, was pleased to announce that – just like the British and Italian brigades – NLBG could collect 200,000 US dollars of CERP funds from the British divisional headquarters, as the Americans had decided to open up the fund to its Coalition allies.¹⁴ The CERP fund was known as “Saddam’s shoebox”, as until September 2003 it was made up entirely of funds confiscated from the Baath party and the liquidated assets of the toppled dictator himself.¹⁵ There was a second major financial fund for the NLBG: the reconstruction fund which the central occupation authority made available under the control of CPA-South for funding

longer-term projects. These CPA funds were allocated to the Dutch CIMIC team in its capacity as Government Support Team.¹⁶ The Dutch did not hesitate to make use of this opportunity. At British headquarters, they were shown a number of shipping containers full of dollar bills packed in plastic, out of which they received their share. A couple of weeks later, the Dutch were again able to collect a further 200,000 US dollars in cash. The safe at Camp Smitty was now literally overflowing.¹⁷

Within a few weeks, the Dutch Government Support Team, on behalf of the CPA, was actively working in public fields such as fuel supplies, public security, irrigation, bridges and roads, education, healthcare, agriculture, industry, water and electricity supplies and sewage. The team had no personnel or materials, and little expertise, to run projects itself, but it conducted inventory surveys and initiated, coordinated and supervised. Once CPA-South had approved a project, a local company took on its implementation.¹⁸ Initiatives were developed as much as possible in conjunction with the new administrative councils and the provincial departments of Iraqi ministries. This was not always easy. After three decades of a centralist and tyrannical regime, the Dutch had the impression that there was little energy or initiative left in the Iraqis. The NLBG also had to learn to deal with the tribal culture, which often made it impossible for a – possibly cheaper – contractor from one tribe to work in another tribe's area.¹⁹

At the start of the operation in Al Muthanna, the scale of CIMIC initiatives was limited. Dutch funds were negligible and there was a 10,000 US dollar ceiling per CERP project. The focus was therefore initially on Quick Impact Projects such as a new playroom at the children's hospital in As Samawah and the renovation of school buildings. After years of neglect, many school buildings had fallen into disrepair and were subsequently plundered. Anything of any value had been removed: teaching materials, window frames, taps, light fittings, electrical sockets and even the electrical wiring. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman understood from prominent Al Muthanna residents that they attached a great deal of value to their children being able to return to school at the start of the new school year in mid-September. So the Marines initially tackled this issue "Iraqi-style" under the motto "adequate is good enough". According to Major Rudolf Keijzer of the CIMIC section this meant "rubbish out and windows in". Later, the section initiated further renovations.²⁰ By involving the local media – who were also operating partly on Coalition project funds – they obtained maximum visibility.

For the time being the main priority of the Dutch CIMIC team, the largest yet unofficial executive service for CPA tasks in Al Muthanna, was to influence the perception of the Iraqis by ‘winning over the hearts and minds’. To this end, larger CERP projects were divided into sub-projects of 10,000 US dollars, so that the NLBG commander could sign for them himself without getting bogged down in bureaucracy. Major Keijzer, responsible for the ‘industry’ sub-area, initiated the renovation of the cement factory near As Samawah, which paved the way for CPA investment worth millions a few months later. By having the newly-elected governor Al Hassani officially reopen the factory on 18 October 2003, the Dutch ensured that the results of their efforts reflected credit on the new Iraqi administrators, who themselves had virtually no budget for doing anything.²¹ Partly due to the intensive cooperation with political adviser Michel Rentenaar at the CPA building in As Samawah, the CIMIC / Government Support Team became the main pillar for support for the occupation authority as well. In spite of the burgeoning budget controlled by the battle group, almost no direction was provided by the CPA or MND South-East and no additional guidelines were issued from The Hague.

CIMIC and Security Sector Reform (SSR) were closely related. In addition to the purchase of materials and improving the facilities of the police, the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (later National Guard) and the Facility Protection Service, the CIMIC team even paid the operational budgets and salaries of the latter two organisations out of CERP funds. One major, Dutch-financed SSR initiative came from political adviser Rentenaar. He used his knowledge of procedures and jargon at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to write a model project proposal to request a large sum from what was known as the ‘Peace Fund’, a Dutch SSR budget.²² The political adviser noted that military personnel were barely conversant with drawing up project proposals like this, which detailed issues such as local requirements, feasibility and Dutch policy criteria.²³ The Peace Fund allocated the NLBG 873,000 US dollars to spend on an emergency package of communications equipment, weapons and other police material (see chapter 4) in order to allow the police force to function to some extent at the end of 2003.²⁴

The Dutch paid all the other projects out of non-Dutch funds. The flow of CERP slowed in the autumn of 2003 but, as a *de facto* sub-contractor of the occupation authority, the first NLBG’s Government Support Team subsequently achieved most of its projects using funds from CPA-South.²⁵ Drinking water supplies in Al Khidr were improved by purchasing a

reverse osmosis unit for converting salt water into drinking water. The Dutch also provided twenty new water tankers, which were to supply clean drinking water to a large number of desert villages not connected up to the mains.²⁶ One crucial and time-consuming task for 1 NLBG continued to be securing fuel supplies to the province, for which CIMIC personnel arranged the logistics from the refinery in Shaibah right up to the petrol pumps in Al Muthanna.

Following four months of Dutch presence in Iraq, almost all public facilities were still in a deplorable state. Yet the Iraqis were very grateful for everything the NLBG had done, something which would change over time as disappointment with the international presence in general grew. Whereas the Dutch Marines had initially been rather jealous of the funds available to 2/5 Marines and the large US Government Support Team, 1 NLBG ultimately succeeded in spending more money than the Americans. This was the result of the battle group's efforts to fully integrate operations with the CPA and to make creative and enthusiastic use of CERP and CPA budgets as well as the Dutch government Peace Fund. In total, 1 NLBG spent nearly 3.5 million US dollars on projects.²⁷

"Spend the money!"

Due to his organisation's faltering reconstruction efforts, CPA chief Paul Bremer decided to boost the CERP funds under military control at the end of 2003. To do so, he used Iraqi oil revenues.²⁸ This was good news for the Dutch in Al Muthanna. "We got to push the money out quickly for the next seven months," the senior US administrator in Baghdad stated at a meeting of CPA and divisional commanders at the end of November 2003. In addition to SSR, Bremer allocated priority to essential services and job creation schemes and stressed the difference between "short and long dollars". The sums for long-term budgets, paid out of the 18.6 billion dollar budget allocated to Iraq by US Congress in December, seemed astronomical. Al Muthanna was earmarked to receive 246 million US dollars. However, there had been no coordination with the CPA or the CIMIC organisation in the province about these funds, and the CPA in As Samawah expected that only a very small portion of this money would actually be spent before the end of the occupation.²⁹ Yet even the short-term budgets were impressive. For the period from December 2003 to April 2004, the CPA made a total of 30 million US dollars available to MND South-East.³⁰ As long as the expenditure could be justified and tendering procedures

were transparent, the motto within the British-led division was: “Spend the money!”³¹

During the second rotation, the CIMIC organisation of the NLBG changed with the arrival of an organic CIMIC Support Element (CSE). This unit of fifteen personnel from the different services was commanded by Major Michiel Posthumus. Together with a further five officials in staff section 9 (CIMIC) of 2 NLBG, a total of 21 military personnel worked full-time on civil-military matters. The NLBG’s infantry companies each had its own CIMIC representatives too, who focused on initiating smaller-scale projects costing several thousand US dollars.³² These QIPS continued to be important and varied from the distribution of gas bottles among locals to the “Ramadan snack-attack”, an initiative in which the units donated *iftar*, the celebratory meal which Muslims eat after sundown during Ramadan, to the less well-off.³³

Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar of 2 NLBG stressed in his correspondence with the Defence Staff that the mission in Iraq was totally different from other international operations (before) and “adhering dogmatically to doctrines will therefore not help Iraq, and certainly not Al Muthanna, to progress”.³⁴ Of all the rotations, 2 NLBG would prove the most generous when it came to spending on CIMIC tasks. At the end of 2003, the battle group and CIMIC in particular entered a “golden age”. The monthly CERP budget shot up to 400,000 US dollars, temporarily peaking at 1.5 million just before New Year.³⁵ On one occasion, Major Posthumus returned from the weekly CIMIC meeting in Basra with 684,000 US dollars in his rucksack.³⁶

The maximum sum for which a brigade or battalion commander could personally sign rose at this time from 10,000 to 50,000 US dollars. From 15 January 2004, the battle group commander could even approve initiatives up to 100,000 US dollars.³⁷ Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar delegated some of this responsibility to his company commanders, who were now permitted to approve projects of up to 10,000 US dollars. By now, the list of completed small and medium-sized projects was impressive. Thanks to the Dutch, for instance, sixteen kilometres of the road through As Samawah were illuminated – when there was power – and large medical storage depots had been constructed for the hospitals 1 NLBG had renovated in Al Khidr and Ar Rumaythah. The television station had also been thoroughly renovated. The various provincial and urban government services received dozens of water tankers, fuel tankers and school buses. With respect to fuel supplies, 2 NLBG arrived just in time to see the opening of the new strategic storage capacity for six million litres of petrol.³⁸ In Al Khidr, a bridge was rebuilt and the cement factory opened a second production line. Of the total of 4.4

million US dollars spent by 2 NLBG's CIMIC team on nearly 300 projects, over 86 per cent was funded from the CERP budget, about 11 per cent from CPA funds and slightly over 2 per cent from the Dutch CIMIC reserve.³⁹

2 NLBG distinguished itself not only through the millions of US dollars under its control but also by successfully appealing to the recently much-increased funds of 'long dollars' held by CPA-Central in Baghdad. In doing so, the Dutch clearly entered into the field of structural reconstruction and local government, by submitting proposals in conjunction with the local Iraqi authorities. The objective was to ensure that the millions of US dollars promised to Al Muthanna would indeed reach the province in good time. 2 NLBG had major ambitions in this respect, as in early December 2003 the unit set itself the target of committing 100 million US dollars to the region's reconstruction.⁴⁰

With this objective in mind, from January 2004 the CIMIC section worked on the construction of a power station to supply forty to sixty megawatts of electricity. The idea was that it would improve the power supply not just to the cement factory – which since the opening of the second production line required about thirty megawatts per day – but also to the local population. The 23 million US dollar plan, which Baghdad ultimately approved, signified major progress in energy supplies for the province. At that time, the power supply capacity in Al Muthanna, supplied from power stations outside the province, fluctuated between forty and fifty megawatts, while the daily requirement was nearly four times that amount.⁴¹ The power supply project was initially to start in March 2004 and be completed in August of that year, but was delayed.⁴² Other large-scale initiatives by 2 NLBG included a ring road, which was to divert traffic on the Route Jackson highway from the centre of As Samawah to the edge of the town, and a water purification plant to the north of Ar Rumaythah worth 65 million US dollars. The latter was to provide clean drinking water for the entire province. These projects more than met the target of 100 million US dollars, and 2 NLBG thus made the first push for the proper reconstruction of Al Muthanna.⁴³

One major driver behind the proliferation of the CIMIC process was the availability of large sums of money from Coalition sources. This seemingly positive development was also the result of CPA weakness and the absence of civilian development organisations.⁴⁴ While the military operation continued apace, at the start of 2004 the Coalition devoted far too little attention and resources to equally important civilian efforts. This meant that the Dutch military had to step up its efforts in the civilian sphere on

its own initiative. The positive effect was that the enormous expenditures reflected a great deal of credit on the Dutch battle group.⁴⁵ “Army fatigues” were always visible at official presentations of materials, finished projects or openings of new facilities, and the NLBG commander would always accompany CPA administrator Jim Soriano at the start or completion of major infrastructural or industrial projects.

During the winter of 2003-2004, Dutch CIMIC personnel in the CPA building in As Samawah spent more money more quickly than the military budget holders could keep up with. The unusually large flows of money in the area of operations therefore started to raise questions. At the Dutch Naval Staff there were rumours of millions of US dollars lying around the CPA building. Alarm bells sounded at the Netherlands Ministry of Defence when, at the end of its tour, 2 NLBG proved to have a cash deficit of 124,000 US dollars and accusations surfaced in the Dutch media about bribes allegedly paid to Dutch military personnel for the allocation of contracts. A subsequent investigation at MND South-East showed that the deficit on the balance sheet could be accounted for: a number of projects by 1 and 2 NLBG turned out initially not to have been included in the division’s administration.

That just left the much more serious accusation of corruption. This was in fact levelled only at a number of interpreters hired locally. These Iraqis made an initial selection when translating quotes and gave preference to paying contractors.⁴⁶ This episode did set the tone, however. CIMIC operations on such a large scale were starting to be seen as a liability for the mission. The suspicions from the Netherlands came at a bad time for the NLBG. Now that the Netherlands was preparing to restrict the CIMIC effort, serious problems in Iraq were just beginning. In the eyes of the Iraqis, the Coalition was not fulfilling its promise of a prosperous new Iraq. The growing lack of security triggered by the burgeoning rebellion and by sectarian violence was undermining the credibility of the international presence even more. A questionnaire in the autumn of 2003 indicated that 47 per cent of Iraqis had confidence in the CPA. A few months later, in March 2004, this had dropped to 14 per cent.⁴⁷

The key role of reconstruction funds

The failing civilian reconstruction effort and the occupation’s crisis of legitimacy caused military controlled development funds to be assigned greater importance. The administrative chaos in Al Muthanna during

the early spring of 2004 underlined this and made it plain that the CIMIC task encompassed more than just winning over the hearts and minds of the Iraqis with a view to force protection. The essence of the mission was at stake as, according to Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar shortly before his departure, “the bottom [was threatening to fall out] of the new Iraqi governance model”. There was still insufficient clarity on the tasks, authorities and responsibilities of the local administrative councils, as Paul Bremer’s Order on Local Governance had spent months awaiting signature.

Even more harmful to the new Iraqi authorities was the lack of financial resources for actually implementing their policies.⁴⁸ Virtually no funds had been received from Baghdad for the purpose of investment and the provincial Governate Council was not yet permitted to levy taxes. This forced NLBG to haphazardly plug the gap with projects financed by CERP and CPA funds. During a visit to Iraq by Defence Minister Kamp and Foreign Minister Bot, the new British CPA-South chief Patrick Nixon pointed out the importance of the Dutch-led CIMIC projects. In his view, they contributed fundamentally to the visibility of the occupation authorities and to stability as a whole.⁴⁹ The Dutch CIMIC team was even paying minor operational budgets of Iraqi government bodies and in doing so helped to keep public administration functioning. According to diplomat Robbert van Lanschot, the new political adviser who had taken up his post at the end of February, these military efforts provided only temporary solace by treating the symptoms instead of the cause.⁵⁰

With a spending limit of 100,000 US dollars per CERP project, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp of 3 NLBG could still afford to spend generously. Small projects, such as providing blackboards for primary schools, continued to be implemented.⁵¹ The CIMIC team also provided emergency aid in the shape of thousands of sandbags to the irrigation department in Al Khidr when the river dyke in town threatened to give way. Dutch and Japanese engineers subsequently reinforced the water defences. Medium-sized projects such as road and bridge construction were also conducted by 3 NLBG. However, the fragility of the CIMIC effort without Dutch funds was demonstrated when CPA-Central temporarily froze the CERP fund in June 2004 in order to get its books in order.⁵² With the civil CPA fund already closed, this suddenly left 3 NLBG empty-handed. The CERP fund was to be continued using US tax revenue, but the extent to which the Dutch battle group would benefit from it was unclear.⁵³

By the time of the change of command to 4 NLBG, Dutch military personnel had spent about 11 million US dollars on CIMIC and SSR projects,

1.2 million of which came from Dutch national funds.⁵⁴ In addition, over 100 million US dollars in long-term project proposals had been approved by the CPA in Baghdad in early 2004. In spite of this enormous effort and the substantial sums involved, CIMIC personnel felt that their work had little effect on actual progress in Al Muthanna. And although they had successfully created support, the ‘gratitude’ of the locals had a limited shelf-life.⁵⁵ A Dutch project officer for water and irrigation noticed that the Iraqis were quickly becoming more demanding. When he arrived at the provincial water department with a brand-new digger, the Iraqi official bluntly asked: “only one?”⁵⁶

The infrastructure and facilities in the Shiite south were in such poor condition after years of neglect that such criticism was understandable. The authorities faced an enormous challenge. During the visit to Iraq by the Dutch Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence at the end of February 2004, governor Al Hassani called the 236 million US dollars provided to his province by the CPA “far too little”.⁵⁷ When he asked whether the Netherlands could not do more with respect to construction tasks, Minister Kamp again explained the Dutch government’s stance: the Netherlands was there mainly to provide security and 125 million euros had already been spent on this military operation. The money for rebuilding Al Muthanna had to come from the Americans and the Japanese.⁵⁸

The arrival of the Japanese humanitarian aid battalion had been eagerly awaited by both the Iraqis and the Dutch. The promise of 1.5 billion US dollars in funds had prompted the Netherlands to provide extensive military support for the Japanese deployment. A large portion of this sum was destined for Al Muthanna and the Japanese battalion was to concentrate on important areas such as water supplies, healthcare and infrastructure. The Dutch battle group was initially impressed with the massive Japanese effort, but disappointment soon followed when it became clear that results would take months.⁵⁹ After its deployment in March 2004, the main Japanese force, a unit of 535 military personnel and 5 diplomats, devoted its time almost exclusively to setting itself up in the new camp near As Samawah, not far from Camp Smitty. The Japanese depended heavily on the Dutch for temporary accommodation, support in building activities, introductions to local bodies and force protection in general.

The CIMIC team of 2 NLBG attempted to get a few major infrastructural projects on the Japanese agenda and 3 NLBG initiated five joint medium-term projects with them relating to electricity, water, agriculture and livestock.⁶⁰ All hope of rapid implementation evaporated among the Dutch, however,

when they learned of the slow bureaucratic processes for obtaining the required money from Japan. The effectiveness of the Japanese was also undermined by the extreme political sensitivity of the mission in Japan and their “unaccustomed and immature” way of conducting operations, which the Dutch military ascribed to a lack of experience.⁶¹

Exaggerated force protection measures made contact with Iraqis difficult and the restrictive instructions on the use of force created uncertainty. In particular after the mortar attack on the Japanese camp on 7 April, the battalion seemed to leave it only occasionally. The diplomats, who dealt with spending the funds, never set foot outside the camp.⁶² The Japanese tended to make many promises, but were hardly able to keep them. This undermined their credibility *and* security. Al Muthanna’s people knew that a great deal could be gained from the Japanese, yet there were few visible results during the first six months. This led to demonstrations outside the entrance to the Japanese camp. In mid-April 2004 a couple of Japanese were taken hostage and not released until a few days later.⁶³

There was great disappointment, not just among the locals but also at 3 NLBG. At a practical level, cooperation with the Japanese was hard. Culture and language barriers proved difficult to break down. Both the NLBG and the CPA were scathing in their assessment of the willingness of the Japanese to coordinate their efforts. This led to the duplication of projects, as well as abuse, as some Iraqis were not shy of demanding duplicate payments for services rendered.⁶⁴ In the meantime, the initial five joint projects did not get off the ground. Friction increased between the Dutch and Japanese due to the massive media attention the Japanese obtained, often at the expense of Dutch CIMIC efforts. In June, they even copied – with great precision – a NLBG information campaign, using stickers and billboards trumpeting their own achievements. They also lured local Iraqi interpreters away from the Dutch by doubling their salaries.⁶⁵ Complaints by 3 NLBG about such practices mounted steadily. At the Ministry of Defence in The Hague, these were added up in what became known as “the Dutch-Japanese cooperation ‘Black Book’”.⁶⁶ In June, the battle group threatened to throw in the towel. Conciliation by MND South-East and pressure from The Hague kept the working relationship with the Japanese aid battalion going, however.⁶⁷

Two million euros for the ‘Beggar’s Army’

The vast stream of US money seemed to dry up in the summer of 2004, while Japanese funds were only finding their way to Al Muthanna in fits

and starts. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp therefore started to press for additional Dutch funds for his successors. When, at the end of May, he understood that his request had been “ruthlessly” shoved aside, he flew off the handle. In his daily report he accused colleagues in The Hague, who had turned down his proposal “sitting at desks, apparently without any background knowledge”, of narrow-mindedness.⁶⁸ The reply from the Defence (Staff) Crisis Management Centre, by now renamed the Defence Operations Centre (DOC), was that they were lobbying up to ministerial level to get the flow of structural development funds from Baghdad going again. Yet the Netherlands itself did not want “to provide a budget at national level to compensate for the drying-up of CERP funds”.⁶⁹

Van Harskamp refused to give up. Just before the change of command to 4 NLBG, he backed up his arguments with a warning: “I hope that if there are any casualties as a result of violence by dissatisfied citizens, officials in The Hague will recall this discussion and accept the consequences.”⁷⁰ This was too much for the Defence Staff. The Director of Operations, Air Commodore Cobelens, replied to the commander of 3 NLBG that his suggestions were deemed improper. He pointed out that The Hague and the battle group were not separate entities with opposing objectives, but working together to make the deployment a success. Cobelens thought it unfitting for the NLBG commander to suggest a causal link between the absence of a larger Dutch CIMIC budget and potential future casualties.⁷¹

Yet Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp was supported in his general view by the Dutch contingent commander in Shaibah, Colonel Aart Kuil, and by the political adviser at MND South-East, diplomat Marc Bentinck, as well as later by his successor Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen.⁷² From Basra, Bentinck predicted that 4 NLBG would have a considerably tougher time in military and political terms than its predecessors. He therefore urged the Ministry of Defence to provide the new commander with sufficient funds.⁷³ After he took up his post, Colonel Matthijssen also requested additional CIMIC funds. His appeal was refused, however.⁷⁴

Within MND South-East, the Dutch were by now known as the “Beggar’s Army”, because the CIMIC section of 4 NLBG was working hard to prise money out of headquarters.⁷⁵ The other partner countries within the division were much better funded by their own national governments. The British troops had UK government budgets during the winter that amounted to 31 million US dollars.⁷⁶ Towards the end of the occupation, the UK government added another £10 million (about 17 million US dollars). The Italian government made available 4 million euros in CIMIC funds to its brigade in Dhi Qar.⁷⁷

In August 2004, 4 NLBG's CIMIC Support Element initiated an ambitious long-term project to set up a cooperative agricultural organisation in which the farmers' unions and the Department of Agriculture of Al Muthanna were represented. At this time, 4 NLBG was becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of decisiveness among local administrators, who no longer seemed to treat the penniless Dutch as a useful partner. CIMIC personnel therefore increasingly turned to the tribal leaders with project proposals.⁷⁸ The main international partners continued to be military, such as the US Army Corps of Engineers, which from October worked on constructing the power station that had been initiated by 2 NLBG.⁷⁹ The relationship with the Japanese battalion was also given fresh impetus by the lack of money. Cooperation with the Japanese continued to be viewed as "an ordeal" according to CIMIC officials, but 4 NLBG nevertheless attempted to integrate a growing number of projects with the Japanese: "we built a road, they built a bridge; we built a road, they asphalted it".⁸⁰

A temporary solution for the battle group's financial problems was provided – once again – by the Americans. In July, they deposited another large sum into the CERP fund after all. The Dutch in Al Muthanna were told that they had been allocated 750,000 US dollars that had to be spent by mid-September 2004.⁸¹ This CERP money at least enabled 4 NLBG to make a tangible difference for a couple of months. Yet compared to previous rotations, its CIMIC Support Element – paradoxically the largest so far at thirty officials – had to spend carefully. It also remained unclear which budget 5 NLBG would be able to use to make a credible CIMIC contribution later that year.

Lack of money was certainly not the only reason for the gradual estrangement between the Dutch battle group and the Iraqis. Support for the authorities – the core of the Dutch military mission – had become more complex. Due to the ending of the occupation and the start of Iraqi self-governance, 4 NLBG had far less insight into and control over political and administrative developments than its predecessors. Moreover, the dismantling of the CPA building-cum-CIMIC centre in As Samawah meant the loss of the physical Dutch (military) presence as a major hub in civil-military relations between the provincial administration, the CIMIC team, the political adviser, the FLT, the police mentor and, last but not least, the local population, who often came up to the gate with specific requests or information. The influence of the Dutch political adviser, who had been the spider in the politico-administrative web during the first seven months of the operation, dwindled. Michel Rentenaar's successor Robbert van Lanschot still had his office next to that of provincial CPA head Soriano until

the end of June, but no longer served as his adviser due to the appointment of a separate American CPA 'Polad'. The executive role of the Dutch political adviser in the administrative build-up task had therefore ceased.

None of the four diplomats from Foreign Affairs who filled the post after January 2004 was able to build up the same position as Rentenaar. The new rotational system of two alternating advisers implemented from the late summer of 2004 meant that each diplomat spent no more than six weeks 'in the field' at a time.⁸² There were sometimes gaps between their postings, leaving the seat temporarily vacant. The effectiveness of the advisers also incidentally decreased due to the limitations on the use of dedicated bodyguards from the Marechaussee. This meant that the diplomats could go out less frequently for a number of months.⁸³

The Dutch political advisers' tasks had therefore been watered down in the course of 2004 to the formal job description which had been given at the start of the mission: advising the military commander on political matters and reporting on the local situation. This development displayed an interesting parallel with the changing role of the battle group. After the end of the occupation, the tasks of the Dutch military contingent had in practice been reduced to their formal proportions: support for the civilian authorities largely by playing a background security role. Police operations and interfering in administration were no longer a part of the mission and also CIMIC, a task which had gone far beyond its formal framework during the first year, had to go back in its box. A year after the start of the Iraq mission, from June 2004, the assignment and caveats with which the Dutch government had sent its troops to Southern Iraq in July 2003 finally corresponded to the actual situation on the ground, although by then the political constellation and threat level in Iraq had changed fundamentally.

It was during this phase, with a new battle group adjusting the mission to the radically altered circumstances, that the second Sadr revolt broke out. Even though Al Muthanna was a sideshow, the ambush in Ar Rumaythah was the low point for the Dutch deployment as a whole. When, in addition to extra armoured vehicles, infantry platoons and intelligence capacity, the Dutch government made available 2 million euros just five days after the incident, the military on the ground in Al Muthanna were relieved and somewhat irritated at the same time.⁸⁴ Following many resolute refusals to add Dutch money to the CIMIC budget, this sudden generosity in the wake of a major attack on the Dutch forces seemed like a form of incident-driven hyper-correction. Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen had in fact requested only 1 million euros, half of what was now provided.⁸⁵

Security assistance and reform

After the Sadr uprisings, the SSR task was also given an additional boost. For 4 NLBG, this meant really just a shift in emphasis, as support for the Iraqi Security Forces was already one of the unit's main tasks at the start of its deployment. The operational concept of security assistance 'in the background' entailed providing concrete support for the Iraqi authorities when requested, while constantly working on the further build-up and improvement of the Iraqi security forces. The second Sadr uprising had made it clear that the police force and National Guard were still incapable of acting adequately against serious disruptions to public order and security. The leadership and quality of personnel in these bodies were sub-standard, their management and planning poor, the influence of the tribes and political parties too great as well as disruptive. The Dutch did not believe that simply monitoring and mentoring these organisations, as initiated during 3 NLBG's stint, would bring them up to the required 'higher plan'.⁸⁶

In the summer of 2004, the Iraqi police force in Al Muthanna had grown to over 1,400 members.⁸⁷ The force had quickly been filled through nepotism and tribalism. The quality of its personnel therefore left something to be desired. The best functioning security force was the special unit set up in 2003 as the Police Support Unit, now called Tactical Support Unit (TSU). It provided both detachments of riot police, who were stationed in the different towns, and special arrest teams for entering and searching compounds. In September 2004, a TSU Emergency Battalion was added to provide rapid general support. As its name suggests, this reaction force was a militarily inspired unit with many former soldiers in its ranks. It comprised five companies. Of the 750 posts in this battalion, about 650 were quickly filled.⁸⁸ There were also less well-staffed, specialised police services in Al Muthanna, such as the Highway Police and the railway police.⁸⁹ The border police remained unchanged at about 200 members, still far too few for a province with such an extensive border area. At 530 men, the National Guard unit (603 Iraqi National Guard Battalion) also remained understaffed, but reinforcements were on their way in the short term.⁹⁰ Overall, the security services in Al Muthanna seemed adequately set up by the autumn of 2004.

The shortcomings in Iraqi security structures had on the other hand been identified several times by anyone dealing with them, such as the personnel at the Provincial Joint Coordination Center⁹¹ and Dutch police mentors Colonel Veltman and his successor Lieutenant Colonel Hans

Askamp.⁹² The latter reported in early August that he noticed at his first meeting of the Provincial Security Committee that the heads of the Al Muthanna security organisations did not make policy and instead only discussed incidents. They blocked solutions for structural shortcomings by constantly citing their financial and material problems and their shortages in personnel. Although these certainly existed, the cause was at least to a degree also poor planning on the part of the security organisation's management itself, resulting in relatively high numbers of personnel being used for static security tasks at police stations, permanent roadblocks and government buildings. The police and National Guard conducted too few vehicle and foot patrols.⁹³

Of all the security services, the regular police force received the worst assessment. In August, 4 NLBG's 'SSR Plan' painted a gloomy picture of the state of affairs: "The average policeman does not possess the required knowledge and skills to do his job properly." The Dutch concluded that the emphasis was "on quantity rather than quality". The police themselves had little confidence about their abilities. They also lacked the correct equipment and most of their premises were in poor condition. In spite of many police being deployed on guard duties, many stations were unlikely to be able to repel external threats. The Dutch feared that without their help the police could become "a plaything' for the different resistance movements". The SSR report proposed that any effort to make improvements should start at the top.⁹⁴

A great deal of criticism could be levelled at the style of leadership of senior police officers, particularly the acting Chief of Police of the province, Kareem Halaibet Menaher al Zayadi, and some of his local commanders. For instance, in Colonel Veltman's opinion the performance of the district commander of Al Khidr was "mediocre", as was shown during an inspection in June. The policeman "demonstrated little involvement in practical policing".⁹⁵ His colleague in Ar Rumaythah was not much better. On the one hand, he was very skilful in giving the impression of being highly capable, yet on the other he led the most unreliable police force in the province.

2 and 3 NLBG had frequently pressed for the dismissal of the provincial Chief of Police, Kareem, as the Dutch had plenty of evidence of corruption on his part. The former soldier, with a Republican Guard past under Saddam Hussein, was known systematically to cream off funds destined for his organisation for his own personal use and that of his tribe.⁹⁶ Since December 2003, Kareem had formally been *interim* provincial police chief. He landed the job after his boss had lost a power struggle with

governor Al Hassani. The Dutch suspected that his appointment arose from an agreement to split power between the influential Al Zayadi tribe (to which Kareem belonged) and Hassani's own clan, the Albu Hassan. An attempt in March 2004 by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior to dismiss Kareem was blocked by Hassani with the argument that the Lieutenant Colonel was only interim and that formally therefore there already was a vacancy.⁹⁷ After the transfer of sovereignty at the end of June, Hassani's position had become unassailable and his conduct exceedingly elusive. None of the Dutch officials could exercise any influence any longer to have Kareem removed.

In the wake of the major ambush in Ar Rumaythah in August, the Dutch no longer concealed their anger at the bad situation within the Al Muthanna security services. On the contrary, even the Minister of Defence expressed direct and open criticism. During a working visit in October, Minister Kamp publicly challenged the way in which the authorities in the province had dealt with and responded to the various threats and insurgent activities. The Dutch argued that the Al Muthanna security services had just stood back and retreated, and that was unacceptable.

Kamp specifically denounced the fact that the rebels in Ar Rumaythah had been able to conduct their ambush unhindered and considered it part of a wider problem. In the minister's opinion, the police forces were unprofessional and, perhaps worse, unwilling. The latter was seen by the Dutch as a kind of betrayal. During a meeting with governor Al Hassani, Kamp indignantly hinted at a breach of confidence, which more or less led to a public clash with the Iraqi official. Journalists present described how a "visibly irritated Al Hassani" took the reprimands of the Dutch minister as a warning to withdraw the battle group. "You must not make threats like that," the governor reacted, "especially not with the local media nearby. It will encourage terrorists."⁹⁸

In order to turn the tide, 4 NLBG set itself a number of targets with respect to SSR. Firstly, the Dutch unit resumed mentoring and monitoring of the security services, as well as conducting joint patrols and improving infrastructure, such as police stations, checkpoints and prisons. There was steady progress on training the National Guard too, the objective being to bring its battalion up to proper strength. There were also efforts to equip the Guard better. However, there was no short-term solution to problems such as the desperate shortage of accommodation and high-quality vehicles, and these persisted for many months.⁹⁹ In October, the National Guard battalion was reinforced with two hundred new recruits. In November, a second round of recruit training started, resulting in the

unit being fully staffed a short time later.¹⁰⁰ The Guard soldiers were also given heavier weapons, such as machine guns and RPGs.¹⁰¹ The border police, another undermanned organisation, had to wait longer for its expansion but, here too, efforts by 4 NLBG led to permission from Baghdad to recruit hundreds of new personnel. Via their CIMIC funds, the Dutch also facilitated the construction of additional border posts.¹⁰²

A provincial police training school was also set up and the PJCC, initially created during 2 NLBG's deployment, was transformed into a fully-fledged provincial emergency command centre or Provincial Joint Operations Center (PJOC). Following the October visit by Minister Kamp, 4 NLBG also made proposals which were aimed at providing "an additional boost" to improving the Iraqi security structures, and in particular their management. This 'Matthijssen Plan' – as it quickly became known in The Hague – provided for the further physical improvement of police stations and teaching of specialist courses, leadership courses and management training to "the more senior police cadres" and members of the National Guard. In early 2005, twenty "high potentials" from the Iraqi police and eight from the National Guard received training in the Netherlands.¹⁰³

Finally, the NLBG focused specifically on the police force in Ar Rumaythah, the organisation which since the second Sadr uprising and due to its aloof or even hostile attitude had been earmarked as "suspect". NLBG commander Matthijssen asserted that in his view "a large part" of this force needed to be replaced.¹⁰⁴ The initiative to do so lay with the Iraqi authorities. Governor Al Hassani appeared to be cooperating. He indicated that he wanted to "give the police force a good clean-up". It was unclear, however, whether he really dared to act in his hometown. He may well have been paying lip service to the indignation of the Dutch in order to avoid openly clashing with them. Al Hassani's position had often been unclear since the latest crisis and he displayed a seemingly unwilling attitude. Moreover, as Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen reported, it was doubtful whether the governor was even capable of achieving such a large-scale clean-up.¹⁰⁵

The Dutch commander therefore preferred to connect his efforts to a national Iraqi 'Quality Improvement Plan' for the police and use this programme to identify and replace "unsuitable IP personnel" top-down.¹⁰⁶ To this end, in September the Dutch military police started to "map out" all personnel in the police force in Ar Rumaythah in order to prepare recommendations for "possible replacement procedures".¹⁰⁷ Although Matthijssen thought that something needed to be done in the short term,

this strategy meant that he was dependent on higher echelons and it therefore took time. As he reported to The Hague, he was told that the Iraqi authorities' improvement programme had been delayed and would not kick off in the southern provinces until November. This was a set-back for the commander, as he estimated that the actual dismissal of policemen could then commence only after the general elections in January 2005. The Iraqi government and its American sponsor apparently wanted at all costs to keep the police force at full strength in order for the country's first democratic elections to be a success.¹⁰⁸

By this time, a provincial Police Training School had been kicked off, thanks to the renovation and fitting out of a building in As Samawah. Staff for the school had already been arranged. In September 2004, 4 NLBG's MP platoon started the first courses, the very first being on firearms.¹⁰⁹ This was followed by a refresher course for the riot police, a course for existing and new prison officers, police officer training and basic training for personnel of the new TSU Emergency Battalion.¹¹⁰

When the security situation appeared to have normalised in September and the Sadrists and other troublemakers – with the exception of a small group of radicals in Ar Rumaythah – were acting less militantly, 4 NLBG conducted two SSR-inspired operations along the border with Saudi Arabia, which had been prepared earlier but postponed due to the Sadr uprising. The October operations took place in different parts of the border area and were a renewed attempt to intercept possible enemy infiltrators on their way to Sunni-dominated areas in Central Iraq and to support the Iraqi border police, who were still short-staffed. Operations Knock Out and Buzzard were planned to take place shortly one after the other, to be conducted together with British, Italian and US troops in both Al Muthanna and the neighbouring province of Najaf.¹¹¹

In Operation Buzzard, which started on 10 October, a multinational detachment of Dutch, British, US and Italian troops set up a Forward Operating Base near the border with Saudi-Arabia and the neighbouring province of Najaf. The FOB served as a command post and logistics and medical support facility, including two US Blackhawk helicopters for medevac. The base was used for operations along the border lasting a week, in which Dutch platoons took on the southern section in Al Muthanna and British Marines the area to the north, in what was officially Najaf territory. The allied troops conducted joint patrols with the Iraqi border police and manned temporary checkpoints, stopping and searching vehicles.¹¹² At the same time, the international forces visited the permanent border posts in order to set up

communications by installing HF radios at the posts and in vehicles. Signals specialists taught the Iraqis how to use the new equipment. The operation was mainly aimed at the future expansion of the border police by four to six hundred men and at constructing eight more permanent strongpoints.¹¹³

4 NLBG thus completed its tour with an emphasis on SSR. The direct support and coaching gave the Iraqi security services a new sense of self-confidence, after morale had plummeted in the wake of the violence of the Sadr rebellion. In Ar Rumaythah, too, Bravo Company again tentatively started to support the police and the National Guard. The transition from the PJCC to PJOC was supported with discussions on objectives and methods of the future command post, and with exercises using scale models. The infrastructural changes for the PJOC were completed at the end of October, a major milestone. In his final report on 14 November, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen looked back with satisfaction on the SSR tasks, which he viewed as the “focus” of his operation. He emphasised the “modus operandi” of the Dutch, “with respect for the culture and people”, which in his view led to the battle group’s initiatives having been easily accepted by the Iraqis.¹¹⁴

The fifth contingent

The next Dutch contingent in Al Muthanna, 5 NLBG, took over responsibility for the province from 4 NLBG on 15 November 2004. The new battle group was built up around 11 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (Grenadiers and Rifles Guards Regiment) from Schaarsbergen, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frits van Dooren. His battalion task group had the same air assault background as 4 NLBG and operated using more or less the same structure, with the Staff and Heavy Weapons Company and Alpha Company in As Samawah, Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah and Charlie Company in Al Khidr. One difference was that the last unit was originally a mechanised infantry unit from 17 Armoured Infantry Battalion (*Prinses Irene* Fuselier Guards Regiment). Infantry platoons from 11 Battalion’s own third company were spread across all units, as were two additional platoons from the ranks of sister unit 12 Infantry Battalion.¹¹⁵ In addition to normal framework operations relating to security in the province, the new contingent’s focal points were the impending general election in January 2005 and the completion of as many CIMIC and SSR projects as possible.¹¹⁶

During his first day as NLBG commander, Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren noted that the Dutch area of operations was still “significantly quieter” than other parts of Iraq, where tensions were in fact rising due

to the us offensive against the rebel stronghold of Fallujah that month. The Iraqi government had even declared a national state of emergency as a result of this crisis. Initial preparations for the ballots in January were also causing more violence elsewhere. The Dutch battle group commander cemented his wish to preserve the peace in his sector by intensifying contacts with the local population – in particular in the larger towns of As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah – and increasing the number of foot patrols and social patrols. His troops' basic attitude towards the Iraqis should be one of "correct and respectful" conduct.¹¹⁷

Instead of the more 'distant' operational concept applied by 4 NLBG, the new battle group again sought more contact with the local population by stepping up its patrols in the residential areas. It therefore returned to the operational philosophy of the first three contingents. The normal framework operations of 4 NLBG 'in the background' outside the towns, as had been decided was suitable after the leap towards Iraqi self-governance in June, were seen in retrospect to have caused a distancing from ordinary Iraqis. Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren attempted to reverse this trend and increase his battle group's seriously reduced situational awareness.

With respect to SSR, 5 NLBG got off to a positive start. The new CIMIC team's first report confirmed that the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs had approved the planned new buildings for the Police Training School in As Samawah. Via the local media the battle group invited Iraqi contractors to bid for the contract. The deadline for tenders was 22 November, after which a contractor was selected as quickly as possible to commence construction of the new 700,000-euro facilities in early December.¹¹⁸ The haste was due to the ending of the NLBG's deployment four months later. Although no formal decision had as yet been taken to end the Dutch deployment, it was increasingly likely that 5 NLBG would be the last Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna. On his most recent visit to Iraq in October, Minister Kamp had already indicated that as far as he was concerned, the mission would not be extended after March 2005.¹¹⁹ In early November, a Dutch parliamentary majority seemed in favour of terminating the deployment too.¹²⁰

With this deadline looming, the amount of work to be done increased. In the autumn of 2004, in the wake of the incidents of August, not only the Netherlands provided extra SSR funds for building up the Al Muthanna security services in the short term. MND South-East also provided an additional 1.8 million us dollars for renovating or rebuilding twelve police stations. The Japanese aid battalion took it upon itself to fit out the stations and provide them with furniture.¹²¹

In the last few months of 2004, it also became clear that the National Guard in Al Muthanna was to be expanded by adding a battalion and a brigade staff. It was a remarkably ambitious step in a province where until that point the only battalion had been understaffed, still did not function properly and in fact comprised separately-operating infantry companies.¹²² The new brigade commander arrived on 13 December. His task was to oversee and direct the expansion process along with a number of staff officers. Due to the lack of elementary infrastructure, 5 NLBG offered the Iraqi Guardsmen temporary accommodation at Camp Smitty. The officers were also given workspace.¹²³ Like all National Guard units, the two-battalion brigade would eventually be incorporated into the new regular Iraqi army.¹²⁴

In early 2005, on the eve of the general election, the Dutch thought that overall the main Iraqi security forces in Al Muthanna were functioning “reasonably well”. In the analysis of the NLBG’s political adviser, one major advantage of the province’s tribal nature still was the fact that “outsiders” stood out immediately. On the other hand, the intertwining of interests of those responsible for maintaining public order and certain tribes was seen as a disadvantage. Personal interests also played too great a part. Chief of Police Kareem, for instance, had expanded his influence substantially by setting up the new TSU Emergency Battalion as “a kind of privately-run unit”, a personal militia. In spite of these flaws, 5 NLBG viewed the creation of the PJOC and its functioning so far as one of the most significant steps forward. During the elections on 30 January 2005, the PJOC was to act “as the focus for joint operations by the security organisations” and in doing so allow the elections to proceed safely.¹²⁵

The run-up to elections

During the first few weeks of 5 NLBG’s tour, there was little of note to report with respect to maintaining law and order. Its infantry companies had quickly got into their stride and were operating ever more closely with the Iraqi police and National Guard. Apart from a couple of incidents, there were many false alarms, which seemed to be aimed at testing the new battle group. During the hours of darkness, for example, there were suspicious movements by civilian vehicles close to Camp Smitty, which appeared to be either reconnaissance or provocation.

On the evening of 19 November 2004, in a ‘problem area’ of As Samawah, a man threw a hand grenade at the last vehicle in a Dutch

patrol. There were no injuries.¹²⁶ A few days later, in the early evening of 24 November, unknown assailants near As Samawah fired a projectile which passed close to Camp Smitty. It was unclear whether the target was the Dutch or nearby Japanese camp or the town itself. In line with standard operating procedures, military personnel took shelter in the bunkers and infantry troops left the camp by the light of flares. Their search led to the arrest of two armed men in a car, who were handed over to the Iraqi police. It later turned out that two flares fired by the battle group had damaged homes in the town. With a view to keeping on good terms with the locals, 5 NLBG paid compensation for this unintended collateral damage.¹²⁷

The tensions that gripped the rest of Iraq due to the events in Fallujah also caused a few ripples in Al Muthanna. A great deal of the intelligence on suspected or actual threats in this period was linked to the fact that insurgents from the besieged rebel town had sought shelter in other parts of the country. In the south, these fighters were helped by radical groups such as the Sadrists, Baathist former regime loyalists or criminal tribes. For instance, members of the Sunni underground movement Ansar al Sunna joined the criminal Zuwaïd tribe in the north of Al Muthanna.

Sadrîst leader Fadhîl Ashaara at the same time was suspected of recruiting fugitive foreign fighters in Nasiriyah with the aim of attacking the Dutch camp near Ar Rumaythah. 5 NLBG took the threats very seriously.¹²⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren even stationed two Apaches and a medical helicopter at Camp Smitty for a while in order to cut their reaction time. Yet for the insurgents Al Muthanna remained mainly a logistics support location and a place to go underground and recuperate, and less of a target in its own right. This was again proven when Iraqi police discovered a storage site containing nineteen advanced IEDs in the open fields near the hamlet of Al Warka, close to Route Tampa, on 6 December. No-one saw this as an increased threat against 5 NLBG in Al Muthanna itself. It was viewed as the accidental discovery of explosives to be used elsewhere.¹²⁹

The absence of attacks or other trouble meant that the last Dutch contingent's operations quickly became dominated by the run-up to the national elections in January.¹³⁰ Preparations for the big day had been going on for a couple of months by this point. The provincial delegation from the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) arrived at the end of October 2004. This organisation's first act was to register the electorate in November and December. With some help from the NLBG's CIMIC section, the IECI set up seventeen registration offices throughout the province, where heads of families could register the names of all potential

voters in their households. Political parties and individual candidates for public offices could also register here.¹³¹ In contrast to elsewhere in Iraq, this process was conducted peacefully and in an orderly fashion.¹³²

What made the elections so complicated was the large number of registered parties and candidates and the fact that four different levels of government were to be voted for. Over two hundred parties had registered for the general election alone. There were 32 parties on the list for the provincial elections. As newly-arrived political adviser Gerard Steeghs reported to The Hague, these could be divided into three categories: "local branches of national parties, religiously-inspired parties and provincial parties".¹³³ The tribes attempted to have frontmen elected in each party in order to retain their hold on provincial politics. The new Governate Council would also have to appoint a new governor afterwards. The intentions of incumbent governor Al Hassani were still unclear. He himself reported that his party, the SCIRI, might call on him to fill a ministerial post at the national level.¹³⁴ He seemed to view this as an appealing way out, as he had lost a great deal of his popularity due to the inability of the provincial authorities to solve the major problems faced in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. The population seemed to hold him responsible for the high unemployment, water, fuel and electricity shortages, and corruption.¹³⁵

The IECI tried to remedy the Iraqis' lack of experience in a free ballot by holding a wide-scale information campaign via the media, loudspeakers mounted on vehicles, the distribution of leaflets, and information sessions. The organisation appeared to be run professionally. However, the issue of security on the election day itself was a different matter. When the Dutch observed that there was insufficient initiative from the Iraqis in this respect, they took it upon themselves to act.¹³⁶ From December, at the instigation of 5 NLBG, there were weekly meetings of an elections "security committee", which included governor Al Hassani, chief of police Kareem, ING commander Awad Salman and Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren.¹³⁷ Even before Christmas, 5 NLBG organised a series of disaster response exercises to test the readiness of the Iraqi Security Forces. Various failings came to light, but, as the Dutch SSR instructors reported, "in terms of local criteria the exercise was a success".¹³⁸ Subsequent exercises were also assessed positively.¹³⁹

Once the IECI had decided on the locations for the 152 polling stations at the end of December, staff officers from the Iraqi National Guard reconnoitred these locations in order to draw up a comprehensive provincial security plan. 5 NLBG conducted its own inventory in order to

monitor this planning process. The IECI recruited about four thousand volunteers to staff the polling stations, the senior members of which were given training organised by the UN in Jordan. The first visible signs that the election campaign had kicked off were around New Year, when banners containing political slogans started to appear all around the towns. It was doubtful, however, whether these would be effective. It was generally assumed that the electorate's votes would not be won over by conviction but could be obtained financially from tribal leaders. "Representatives of various parties" informed the Dutch political adviser Steeghs that negotiations were underway "with the leaders of certain crucial tribes" and that some deals had even already been made.¹⁴⁰

Three candidates had already put themselves forward for the post of governor. Incumbent governor Al Hassani, head of the local SCIRI party, was available after all, although he also continued to "play with the idea of a national political career, or even retirement". In so doing, Al Hassani presented himself as a relative outsider, even though this did not tally with his responsibilities for ensuring a safe and fair electoral process. The Dutch suspected that this pointed to cunning tactics to regain some of his popularity by distancing himself from "elections which, as many Iraqis believed, had been imposed by foreigners".¹⁴¹

The second candidate was also a familiar figure: Hakem Khazal Hashaan, leader of the Union of Middle Euphrates tribal network and the man who had come second in the previous elections in October 2003. The third candidate was Mohammed al Zayadi, a rather controversial but nevertheless charismatic former exile (he had spent a long time in the US) who had worked as an adviser to the CPA during the year of occupation. At that time, he had been known for his sinister machinations behind the scenes and was nicknamed "Bremer al Zayadi".¹⁴² Together with two fellow tribesmen, chief of police Kareem and tribe leader Sheikh Raysaan Muthaser al Zayadi, he formed a mighty 'triangle of power' in Al Muthanna province. As a leading member of the large Zayadi clan and head of the influential tribal coalition he had himself created (called the Al Muthanna Union) Mohammed al Zayadi hoped to obtain a prominent role on the province's political stage.¹⁴³

A carnival-like atmosphere

The final few weeks prior to the elections were relatively quiet. The NLBG spent its time vigilantly conducting patrols and checks and preparing and mentoring Iraqi institutions. There was some anxiety as to what was

in store, but at the same time the situation was calm and there were few incidents. The Coalition camps near As Samawah had been fired at on only two occasions during these weeks. On 11 January, a 107mm rocket landed within the perimeter fence of the Japanese base but failed to go off.¹⁴⁴ On 13 January, the mortar tracking radar again detected the launch of a projectile, but once more no damage was caused.¹⁴⁵ These minor incidents had little to do with the approaching elections, NLBG commander Van Dooren reported, but were linked to ongoing negotiations on suitable rental charges with the owners of the land on which the international camps stood. The shots were apparently meant to exert some pressure on the negotiation process.¹⁴⁶

On the morning of Wednesday 19 January, a fatal shooting incident took place at a temporary roadblock set up along Route Milwaukee (As Samawah – As Salman) by the Dutch reconnaissance platoon as part of a division's interception operation, which lasted several days (Operation Andalucia). It appeared to be a repetition of some previous incidents: in the dark a small truck drove towards a Dutch roadblock at high speed, ignored warnings via light signals and, when it came too close, one of the Dutch soldiers fired directly at the truck. One passenger died, the driver was unharmed and was arrested. He explained that he had seen the military roadblock too late and had had problems with his brakes.¹⁴⁷

The day before, as a final test before the elections and directed by the PJOC, a large-scale exercise had been held, with scenarios in all three towns. The simulated incidents all mimicked possible events on election day, such as bomb threats, demonstrations, IED attacks near polling stations and attacks on joint police and National Guard checkpoints.¹⁴⁸ NLBG's Information Operations section also distributed 20,000 pamphlets in order to remind people of the 115 emergency telephone number which anyone could use to contact the PJOC. Posters and a newspaper advertisement also brought this number to the attention of the local population.¹⁴⁹ Divisional headquarters sent the NLBG reinforcements in the shape of a British infantry company comprising 80 Royal Highland Fusiliers. The unit arrived a couple of days before the elections.

The election day itself, Sunday 30 January, passed without incident. According to Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren there was a "carnival-like atmosphere." There were lots of people on the streets, who were excited and in high spirits. The NLBG commander was very impressed by the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces, which were out in force on this "day of truth".¹⁵⁰ As reported by political adviser Steeghs, who had criss-crossed the province that day and witnessed "a festive spirit" everywhere,

as well as a high turnout, security was very tight, “intense” even. At the polling stations, the diplomat had encountered “a kind of village square atmosphere: many people hung around after voting to talk and smoke together”. The electoral process seemed to have been conducted properly and fairly. Other than a few minor “technical” problems, there had been no intentional manipulation or electoral fraud. The IECI drew up result charts from the contents of the ballot boxes, which they then sent to Baghdad. The official results would be announced in two weeks.¹⁵¹

Violence on the election day itself remained limited throughout Iraq, but overall the democratic elections were less successful than the positive events in the Shiite south and Kurdish north seemed to suggest. Draconian security measures had curbed resistance throughout the country, but the election results ran largely along sectarian lines. The turnout was very high in Kurdish and Shiite areas, but virtually zero in Sunni areas. The boycott by Sunni voters and the fact that most Iraqis voted for parties allied to their own sectarian group led to renewed debate on the unity of Iraq and how representative the government really was. It was out of the question for Sunni President Al Yawar to remain in power. The secular party of interim Prime Minister Allawi was also consigned to the margins. The Kurds and Shiites divided power between them. Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani became the new president of Iraq, while Shiite Prime Minister Ibrahim al Jafaari led a coalition government of Kurdish and Shiite parties.

The results did contain a few surprises at the provincial level in Al Muthanna though. For instance, support for the SCIRI – governor Al Hassani’s party – was smaller than anticipated. With eight seats, the party was the largest in the Governate Council, but the Union of Middle Euphrates tribal coalition and the moderate Fadhila party gained a respectable second place with six seats each. There was also a religious party with five seats and many smaller alliances with a couple of seats each. The Al Muthanna Union, the party to which candidate for governor Mohammed al Zayadi belonged, gained only a disappointing four seats, while he had counted on receiving half of the total (i.e. about twenty seats or even more).

All in all, the 41-seat Governate Council showed a fragmented political playing field. It offered plenty of opportunity for forming coalitions, which meant that the process of electing the council chair and a new governor was anything but clear-cut. To complicate matters, two new candidates put themselves forward for the post of governor in addition to the three already announced. Karim Abid Sajed of Fadhila and Ahmed Marzuk of Dawa were now also running for office.¹⁵² This was not necessarily because

they thought they stood a good chance, but rather because they hoped to be able to ask a higher price of the more likely candidates, such as current governor Al Hassani, during the coalition negotiations.

Reconstruction or force protection?

In addition to the elections and SSR, 5 NLBG had its hands full with completing the many CIMIC projects initiated by its predecessors and spending an extra 2 million euros in Dutch reconstruction funds. In identifying projects and allocating contracts, 5 NLBG adopted the same criteria as its predecessors: visibility, maximum job creation, having as many Iraqis benefit as possible, suitability for media campaigns and creation of a long-term boost to the local economy. Encouraging agriculture and improving food hygiene were given priority at this time, as the agricultural sector was by far the most important economic pillar for Al Muthanna.¹⁵³ In addition to the massive inoculation of livestock and the construction of a central abattoir, the NLBG's CIMIC team also put a great deal of money into maintaining and improving the infrastructure and fuel supplies.¹⁵⁴

In the final six months of Dutch operations in Al Muthanna, the CIMIC teams of 4 and 5 NLBG put a large portion of the additional funds into improving secondary roads, which were in a terrible state in particular during the winter. Also, the NLBG's engineer company laid five bridges to open up remote and disadvantaged parts of the province. This was made possible partly thanks to the donation of 850 metres of Bailey bridge by the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management. In November 2004, the battle group was also finally able to complete the ring road around As Samawah started by 2 NLBG.¹⁵⁵

CIMIC efforts in Iraq may not have entirely matched the definition of reconstruction, with its long-term implications, but it was clear that there was more than just force protection involved. In fact, the twenty-month CIMIC efforts in Al Muthanna were impressive. As with SSR, the Dutch involvement in CIMIC in Iraq was on a scale never seen before in Dutch international military operations. Exact data were unavailable, but between July 2003 and March 2005 the NLBGs completed between 600 and 1,000 projects. To do so, the Dutch forces spent over 16 million US dollars from Dutch and allied funds¹⁵⁶, of which the Dutch share can be exactly ascertained: about 2.7 million US dollars in CIMIC funds and over 1.8 million US dollars from the so-called Peace Fund (later called Stability Fund).¹⁵⁷ In meeting the 'reconstruction demand', a further 100 million or so in 'long

dollars' for CPA project proposals (in particular from 2 NLBG) were added, as well as the (non-financial) contribution of the battle group – whether or not included under CIMIC – to institutional reconstruction projects such as administrative reforms and the elections.

The Dutch Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs later admitted that they had incorrectly estimated the scale of the CIMIC task *at the start* of the operation.¹⁵⁸ Yet they persisted in underestimating the importance of CIMIC for far too long, in spite of the many warnings from several NLBG commanders, those of 3 and 4 NLBG in particular. There may not have been a direct causal link between the casualties of the night of 14 August 2004 and the ministries' refusal to provide additional Dutch funds to 4 NLBG, but what is clear is that the Dutch battle group had to curb its successful hearts and minds campaign at a crucial moment in the deployment due to a lack of support and funds. This also occurred at a time when many changes were shaking the parameters of the mission.

The material Dutch CIMIC contribution only grew again structurally from September 2004. In particular 5 NLBG benefited from this financial surge, but it was too little too late. In his capacity as CIMIC staff officer in the final contingent, Major Jacob Lussenburg maintained that the Netherlands was a minor player in this field and that the 2 million euros provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had quickly been spent. It was his firm belief that "they could have spent 20 million euros".¹⁵⁹ The neglect of the region by the former regime throughout a long period of war and sanctions was always painfully visible, and although the Japanese mission gradually provided more concrete results in the course of 2005, civilian aid organisations conducted very few projects in Al Muthanna.¹⁶⁰ The relative importance of military construction efforts under the CIMIC flag therefore remained undiminished.

CERP continued to fulfil a key function for the NLBG in the same way as it did for its allies. Despite its many flaws, later analyses identified the programme as one of the main success stories in Iraq – and certainly not just due to its effect on troop security. According to those on the ground, CERP funds were more effective in convincing the Iraqis that the Coalition aimed to improve their lives than the CPA's red tape-ridden 'long dollars'.¹⁶¹ Major General David Petraeus, who in mid-2003 played a major role in setting up the CERP fund in his capacity as divisional commander in Mosul in Northern Iraq, summarised it succinctly: "Money is ammunition."¹⁶² It was therefore mainly the non-Dutch project funds which enabled the NLBG to contribute to the crucial civil dimension of the effort to stabilise and reconstruct Iraq.

7

Dutch approach?

A stubborn minister

In spite of Defence Minister Kamp's resolve on the subject, a Dutch withdrawal from Al Muthanna was certainly not a foregone conclusion in the autumn of 2004. The British were exerting great pressure on the Dutch to stay and the arguments in favour of a withdrawal were rather unconvincing. The Dutch Ministry of Defence stressed that the Iraqis would be well able to guarantee their own secure environment from March 2005 onwards. But was that indeed the case? The British argued that achieving 'regional/Iraqi control' throughout Southern Iraq was further off than The Hague claimed, and that the creation of independently-operating Iraqi security services had gone less smoothly than predicted. Senior British politicians and military personnel were in fact afraid that too premature a withdrawal from Al Muthanna could upset the situation. They asked the Netherlands to reconsider its decision via several channels.¹

In the Netherlands itself, journalists in particular were doing their best to pick holes in the government's reasoning as part of the public debate on the issue. Surely, the Sadr uprising in August and the Ar Rumaythah ambush had demonstrated that the Iraqi security bodies were far from able to stand on their own two feet? "Withdrawing if the mission – the promotion of security and stability – has not yet succeeded, is that an option?," national newspaper *de Volkskrant* asked.² *NRC Handelsblad* reported that some Dutch military personnel also thought that Dutch troops were withdrawing from Iraq too soon. At the end of December 2004, the newspaper quoted former NLBG commander Matthijssen: "Iraqi security personnel are not yet ready." During Minister Kamp's visit to the

area of deployment in October, Matthijssen had reported that he believed the Iraqis were not yet fully capable of taking responsibility for security in Al Muthanna. But Kamp had apparently already made up his mind about withdrawing by that point, officially mainly for reasons regarding the planning of Dutch contributions to other allied international operations, including a possible deployment of Special Forces to Operation Enduring Freedom and heading a new Provincial Reconstruction Team in southern Afghanistan.³

The fifth battle group and the Defence Staff shared the opinion of the commander of 4 NLBG. It was no coincidence that additional Security Sector Reform efforts were being made during the final few months. This was because things were not going particularly well. Military personnel were unhappy with the government's stance in a letter to the Second Chamber of Parliament in November which suggested that the security services in Al Muthanna would achieve regional control status in March 2005. They thought this prognosis was far too optimistic and too convenient with regard to the withdrawal. The identified issues in the Iraqi security bodies were not yet resolved and problems with changing loyalties and corruption could not be expected to dissipate within a few months either. Material bottlenecks also persisted. Many SSR objectives would only be achieved in the course of 2005. Minister Kamp was therefore advised to be less positive about the results so far and to emphasise other arguments in favour of his decision to withdraw.

In the meantime, what 5 NLBG wanted above all was clarity. Preparations for a redeployment had been well under way since December. No firm decision had been made at the politico-strategic level, but already before the New Year the NLBG and MND South-East made concrete arrangements for a possible change of command. The Dutch would start packing up from early February 2005 – shortly after the general elections. Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren would hand over area responsibility to a British successor on 7 March. One week thereafter, no later than 15 March, the Dutch units would cease their operational tasks and concentrate fully on their departure.⁴ Although the process could be halted by a possible delay to the Iraqi elections, a substantial deterioration in the security situation or political events in the Netherlands, planning was nevertheless begun.⁵

The long awaited political decision on troop withdrawal was finally taken in January, but not until after one final hitch. On Monday 17 January Prime Minister Balkenende and Ministers Bot and Kamp decided that

the Netherlands would end operations in Al Muthanna. In doing so, the government went against the wishes of the vvd government coalition party – Kamp’s own party, which reiterated that “in contrast to what Kamp had written in his latest Letter to Parliament, it is not at all certain that the Iraqis are themselves in a position to maintain public order in the province”.⁶ CDA, the largest partner in the coalition and the party of Balkenende and Bot, had also long entertained doubts and had shown itself to be susceptible to American and British pressure to stay in Iraq. In December, it argued in favour of a longer NLBG deployment, a view prompted by the main British argument that the Iraqis were still insufficiently equipped on the security front for independence.⁷

Ultimately, British pressure had the opposite effect. Minister Kamp was annoyed by the fact that the British were openly questioning the Dutch Ministry of Defence’s claims, and by the fact that they were directly interfering in Dutch parliamentary deliberations. He therefore made short shrift of the opinions of some of his government colleagues, who under the influence of the British lobbying seemed to be attracted to the option of a delayed redeployment up to and including June 2005. A sixth battle group containing about 650 personnel and, in the final phase, a reinforced infantry company of about 200 troops would then be required. Kamp resented the notion and brought the majority of the council of ministers round to his way of thinking. The vvd and D66 ministers were immediately persuaded by his resolute refusal to give the extended option a fair hearing during the cabinet meeting on 14 January. Kamp merely promised to investigate whether the option was feasible in ‘military-technical’ terms, but had in fact already consigned the idea to the dustbin. His CDA colleagues wanted to consider the matter over the weekend, which meant that the definitive decision would not be taken that day but on the following Monday. This delay did not alter the outcome, however. Kamp got his way and the decision was taken to withdraw from Iraq.⁸

Game over

Thanks to the successful elections in January 2005, the Netherlands was able to start withdrawing its troops from Iraq with its head held high. A major milestone had been reached. The new transitional Iraqi government, dominated by Shiites and Kurds, could draw up a new constitution which would be ratified by a national referendum in October. Another general election would then be held a few months later, leading to the first truly

democratically-elected Iraqi government at the end of 2005 or early 2006. The political advisers at MND South-East thought that, in spite of the major gains by fundamentalist parties, the outcome of the elections in Shiite Southern Iraq was satisfactory.⁹ In Al Muthanna, as in the other seventeen provinces, the elected members of the Governate Council set to work on the next step in the process: the election of a new governor and council chair.

Former political adviser Michel Rentenaar continued to follow events in Al Muthanna from the Dutch embassy in Beirut. He was satisfied. When former CPA chief Jim Soriano – with whom he was still in touch – asked about the elections in ‘their’ province from his new post in India, the ex-Polad replied: “We were not far wide off the mark.” In his opinion, the council members who had been elected via the caucus procedure in October 2003 had done quite well. Rentenaar concluded that the imposed allocation of seats among the tribes, political parties and technocrats had been similar to the new allocation after the elections. Even without foreign pressure, the people of Al Muthanna had elected three women to the provincial parliament. The predicted shift towards religious parties had occurred, but the Dutch diplomat thought that this was largely in name. He saw continuity and wagered that, in spite of fierce competition from former CPA adviser Mohammed al Zayadi, current governor Al Hassani would be given a second term, especially since his SCIRI party dominated the new national government in Baghdad.¹⁰

The governor’s re-election was far from a given, however. SCIRI did indeed hold the largest number of seats in Al Muthanna, but only eight out of a total of 41. Party discipline was almost non-existent, so the candidates primarily spent the weeks prior to the governorship elections on 15 March 2005 canvassing for individual votes and tribal support. In spite of the disappointing result of the council elections, Mohammed al Zayadi had the best chance of winning the governorship, according to Dutch estimates.¹¹ It was therefore a great surprise when the outcome turned out to be in favour of Al Hassani nevertheless. As a consolation, his opponent Al Zayadi was given the post of council chair. Much would remain the same, albeit that the balance of power had shifted slightly towards the Al Zayadi tribe.¹²

After the elections, 5 NLBG’s operations were dominated by the impending redeployment of troops. In early February, a 300-strong Redeployment Support Detachment arrived in As Samawah to partially dismantle the Dutch camps and to transport material back to the Netherlands.¹³ The Dutch handed over the bases in Ar Rumaythah and

Al Khidr to the local Iraqi security services. On 7 March, Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren transferred responsibility for security in Al Muthanna to Lieutenant Colonel Tim Wilson, battalion commander of the 1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards, the unit which formed the core of the new British Task Force Eagle (later Task Force Muthanna).

The formal end to the twenty-month Dutch deployment to Iraq, in which about 7,500 military personnel had participated and which cost about 146 million euros, was signalled by the striking of the Dutch flag and the raising of the Union flag.¹⁴ The ceremony at Camp Smitty received a great deal of attention from Dutch, international and Iraqi media, and those present included the Dutch Chief of Defence Staff General Dick Berlijn, British Minister of State for the Armed Forces Adam Ingram, the commander of MND South-East, Major General Jonathon Riley, Colonel Kiyohiko Ota of the Japanese contingent, and the main Iraqi authorities. The most notable absence was that of governor Al Hassani. The cooling in his relationship with the Dutch over the preceding year could not have been expressed more clearly.

In his farewell speech, General Berlijn remembered the Dutch soldiers killed in action. He said that he considered the mission a success and he was full of praise for his troops who, in the wake of several setbacks, had not taken "the wrong path" and had continued to operate in the same de-escalating and open spirit, in spite of having been "the strongest tribe" in Al Muthanna.¹⁵ They had been well aware that "continuously displaying" their power would not have been to their advantage, he claimed. Berlijn also praised the Dutch people for not having clamoured for the return of the troops in the wake of the Sadr uprisings. In the view of the country's most senior military leader, the Dutch had done well to resist calls from some quarters to conduct their patrols 'under armour', as this would have negated "the philosophy behind the Dutch presence".¹⁶

After the change of command, the remaining Dutch forces continued to be operational for another week in order to support the British and show them the ropes.¹⁷ On 3 April 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren was the last Dutch soldier to leave Iraqi territory. The redeployment was four weeks ahead of schedule. The British replaced the 1,400 Dutch in Al Muthanna with 600 troops. British Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon told the House of Commons at the end of January 2005 that this sharp reduction was possible thanks to the progress made by the Dutch with respect to stability and SSR. In reality, the reduction was driven by need.¹⁸ The commander of MND South-East, General Riley, had to furnish the troops for Al Muthanna

almost entirely out of his already over-burdened British brigade and was eagerly awaiting the arrival of allied reinforcements. There was great relief therefore when the Australian government decided to deploy 450 troops to Al Muthanna at the end of February. The Australian unit, comprising an infantry company, a cavalry squadron and a support company, was to be operational in May.¹⁹ Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren and his British successor were both aware that, at less than half the Dutch capacity, the British would be severely understaffed until the arrival of the Australians. Until the ‘Diggers’ arrived, Lieutenant Colonel Wilson expected to make no progress.²⁰

‘Dutch approach’

The civilian population of Al Muthanna was apparently suspicious of the British newcomers. Around the time of the change of command, journalists from national newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* painted a very negative picture of the reception of the successors, who gave the impression of being tense. According to the Dutch media, the British stayed in their vehicles during their first patrols and although there had been no mortar or rocket attacks on the base camp for many months they constantly wore their protective vests, even inside Camp Smitty.²¹

The negative response of the people of Al Muthanna to the British takeover of their province was no surprise. Local representatives had already informed the NLBG four months previously that they wanted nothing to do with the former colonial power. They pointed to the violent suppression by the British of the 1920 Shia uprising, a historical trauma which remained etched in their collective memory.²² Following the elections in January, the NLBG received further reports of concerns in this respect. The Iraqis had heard how the British in Basra operated “and it is clearly differently from how we do things,” NLBG commander Van Dooren mentioned. The Lieutenant Colonel had witnessed the Royal Highland Fusiliers at work during the election campaign. His assessment was that “they were a rather edgy lot”. He based this on their driving behaviour, the fact that they always wore their helmets, “kept their fingers on the trigger” and “immediately adopted a firing position on arrival at a location”.²³ However, Van Dooren did note that the British infantry company had quickly adapted to local conditions and to the Dutch *modus operandi*.²⁴

The Dutch newspapers’ descriptions of the contrasting styles of the Dutch soldiers and their British counterparts meant that the NLBG was

seen in a positive light back home. By now it was common knowledge that there was an even greater contrast between the NLBG's modus operandi and that of the Americans. This was underlined in the *New York Times* of 24 October 2004. The article, reprinted in the internationally-distributed *International Herald Tribune* under the heading 'Dutch soldiers find smiles protect as well as armor', stated that the Dutch on patrol in As Samawah were constantly greeted by adults and children alike. The infantry personnel replied with "salaam aleikum" (peace be upon you).²⁵ The article explained that the Dutch soldiers deliberately opted to drive around in open vehicles rather than armoured vehicles, that they did not wear their helmets during patrols and that reflective sunglasses were prohibited as they impeded eye contact.

Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen of 4 NLBG expressly bore this narrative out during his interview with journalist Norimitsu Onishi.²⁶ According to the article, which was also published in the Dutch *NRC Handelsblad* and translated in a few Arabic newspapers, the Lieutenant Colonel maintained that his troops adhered to their "soft approach" even after two fatal attacks in order to improve interaction with the locals.²⁷ The support and endorsement of the Iraqis was presented as a form of protection, because it helped to keep in touch with the sentiments among the population and made people willing to share information. Matthijssen's narrative resembled the message given by Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar of 2 NLBG in December 2003 in his interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*. He asserted that the Dutch approach contributed to the restricted number of casualties. "If we have a higher threat, we get closer to the people."²⁸

Norimitsu Onishi reported that the Dutch called this modus operandi "the Dutch approach to patrolling". She characterised it as somewhere between the work of policemen on the beat and that of a social worker. The unspecified term 'Dutch approach' therefore derived from the Dutch forces themselves. What British journalist Nicholas Blanford had subtly called "the Dutch touch" during his visit to Al Muthanna at the end of 2003 had in Dutch Defence circles since then been upgraded to a more pretentious term.²⁹ The self-importance was mostly contained in the word 'approach', which in contrast to 'touch' suggested a deliberate, specific strategy. Quite apart from the question whether or not such an approach existed, the image of a typically-Dutch military modus operandi in Al Muthanna fitted in well with the distinction the Dutch government had liked to make since the spring of 2003 between the Coalition's invasion and occupation forces on the one hand and the – supposedly separate –

stabilisation forces (including the Dutch) on the other. The message was that things were done differently in what Minister Kamp and General Berlijn consistently called “our” province of Al Muthanna, and that partly as a result of this the situation compared positively to other parts of Iraq, where a state of war existed.³⁰

The positive assessment in the foreign press caused the Dutch media to pick up on the narrative of the supposedly typical ‘Dutch approach’ more widely than before. After reading the article in the *New York Times*, popular historian Geert Mak wrote in *NRC Handelsblad* with some pride about the Dutch military who had maintained law and order in Al Muthanna in open vehicles, without wearing helmets, greeting locals in a friendly fashion, with their weapons pointing downwards. In Mak’s opinion, it had been an extraordinarily successful and “typically Dutch method of pacification”, in which the commander “even had a budget for minor aid projects”.³¹ Columnist Henk Hofland, who had spent over two years criticising Dutch policy on and in Iraq, also ascribed the persisting calm “in our province” Al Muthanna to a ‘Dutch approach’. In doing so, as he understood from a Colonel on television, the troops successfully combined “social patrols” with reconstruction work on schools and bridges and training programmes for the police.³²

Cor Lammers, professor emeritus in organisational sociology, went one step further. In his book *Vreemde Overheersing* (Foreign Rule), he distinguished a typically Dutch occupation style dating back to the seventeenth century. The sociologist took the ‘Dutch approach’ in Iraq as presented in the *New York Times* as an example of the Dutch method of what he called “benevolent occupations”.³³ He used this apparently contradictory term to describe operations such as those in Cambodia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq, which in his view were very similar to occupations in many prominent aspects, but which at the same time distinguished themselves positively from more authoritarian ‘colonial occupations’ or from aggressive ‘annexation occupations’. The objective with the new ‘stabilisation’ operations was decreasing rather than increasing the presence in the occupied area. The main priority was to improve the fate of the inhabitants, chiefly by controlling and settling conflicts and (facilitating) reconstruction. Incidentally, in his very broad – non-legal – interpretation of the term, Lammers ignored the question whether the local population perceived such a type of occupation as being as ‘benevolent’ as he himself did.

Ar Rumaythah as a litmus test

A number of prominent commentators thus adopted the notion of an effective ‘Dutch approach’ with remarkable ease. This is especially notable in view of the Sadr uprising of Summer 2004 and the subsequent events in Ar Rumaythah in August, where apparently no Iraqi had taken the trouble to warn the Dutch of the planned ambush. Many Iraqi civilians must have been aware of the attack at some point, yet no-one came forward. The assertion that the Dutch had calmly stayed their course after the major gunfight by continuing to conduct patrols “on foot or in open vehicles in the usual manner” also continued to be made in the years following the Dutch exit from Iraq.³⁴ Army lecturer Robert Gooren claimed in an article in the US Army’s *Military Review* that the ‘Dutch approach’, with the emphasis on winning ‘hearts and minds’ and respect for local culture, was not relinquished in the wake of the Sadrist attacks. According to Gooren, even under the threat of violence, the NLBGS had not given priority to force protection at the expense of good relations with the local population.³⁵

Yet did the Dutch troops indeed continue operating in the same ‘open’ manner even in the face of the increased threat of the Sadr uprisings, as chief of the armed forces General Berlijn also suggested during his speech at the change of command in March 2005? There was no unequivocal answer to this question. On two occasions in 2004, the ‘province of peace’ briefly threatened to be sucked into the spiral of violence which permanently disrupted other parts of Iraq.³⁶ It was true that Dutch forces did not generally use armoured vehicles, but there was a tendency to do so among 3 NLBG infantry personnel following a series of incidents and gunfights with the Mahdi Army in the spring of 2004. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp of 3 NLBG specifically requested reinforcements in the shape of Leopard tanks and YPR armoured infantry fighting vehicles in order to operate under improved protection – just like the British occasionally did under heavy threat.

The Dutch Defence Staff rejected his request to try to keep with the chosen strategy. The headquarters in The Hague argued that the operation had been set up as a light infantry deployment and any deviation from this concept would send the wrong signals to the Iraqis. It would also mean the failure of the *modus operandi* which until then had proven to be a success and which fitted in with what came to be presented over the course of the operation as a ‘Dutch approach’. The commander in the field was allocated Apache helicopters instead, which, in spite of their overwhelming

firepower, were mainly used as information gathering platforms and therefore better matched the open approach.

The main test for whether or not there was such a thing as a ‘Dutch approach’ was provided by the events in Ar Rumaythah in the second half of 2004, after the ambush. Nowhere was the estrangement between the Dutch and the local population as great as in that rebellious town.³⁷ While Dutch units were gradually able to pick up where they left off in most of the capital and in Al Khidr after the ceasefire ending the Sadr uprising had been declared, the presence in Ar Rumaythah was strongly reduced. The Dutch battle group restricted the number of movements in the town to what was absolutely necessary and Bravo Company no longer conducted any foot patrols. The MP platoon operated almost exclusively at the police posts outside the town and elsewhere in the province. The monitoring and mentoring of the town police was cut back.³⁸ The decision to cease foot patrols in Ar Rumaythah with a view to de-escalation as well as the reduction of the general military presence seemed to run counter to the line propagated by 4 NLBG’s predecessors: in the case of an increased threat, increase the frequency of patrols precisely in order to frighten off those who mean to cause harm.³⁹

4 NLBG therefore did the opposite of what Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar of 2 NLBG had previously presented as *the* Dutch *modus operandi*. The battle group in fact backed off. The conditions under which Dutch troops had worked in the second half of 2003 and those of 4 NLBG one year on were totally different, however. The occupation had formally ended and Iraqi self-governance went hand-in-hand with an expressly support-based *modus operandi* on the part of the NLBG, in line with the strategy laid down nationally by the MNF. This more detached method of operating did not help relations between the Iraqis and the Dutch troops in the specific situation in Ar Rumaythah. For example, Captain Dennis Klein had served as commander of the first military police detachment in 2003 and had often been in Ar Rumaythah. Yet he hardly recognised the place when he returned a year later. Where MPs mentoring the Iraqi police in 2003 had been able to “eat a kebab on the streetcorner” among the Iraqis in a relaxed fashion, the Captain now saw hostile and fearful glances.⁴⁰ Ar Rumaythah, like other parts of Iraq, seemed to have reached the point where the presence of Coalition troops on the streets no longer meant protection, but rather acted as a magnet to violence and confrontation. Both the local population and the authorities requested the Dutch troops to stay away during the second Sadr uprising. Putting de-escalation first and accepting

the complete breakdown of trust between its Bravo Company and the local authorities as a *fait accompli*, 4 NLBG's commander Matthijssen complied.⁴¹

In doing so the Dutch forces allowed a wedge to be driven between them and the local population. They did not resume foot patrols in Ar Rumaythah for another three months. By then the town had been handed over to another infantry company and the new commander of 5 NLBG, Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren, announced on his own initiative that his troops would display a more visible presence – especially on foot. He found a willing participant in this operational concept in Major Olaf Lagas, commander of the successor Bravo Company. During reconnaissance several months earlier, the two officers had witnessed the estrangement between their predecessors and the Iraqis. They intended to improve the contact with the locals and their own information position again.⁴² Both in the problem areas of the provincial capital As Samawah and in Ar Rumaythah, “the areas which had previously been out of bounds”, 5 NLBG again started conducting intensive and widespread patrols, regularly supported by the Apaches.⁴³

The last Dutch battle group also frequently received requests from the local community to stay away from certain areas, but as far as Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren was concerned, complete freedom of movement was the “bottom line” for his troops. His company commanders therefore deliberately chose to ignore such “hints”.⁴⁴ When, at the end of November 2004, infantry troops from Bravo Company again entered the town of Ar Rumaythah on foot, they were surprised at the relatively relaxed situation they encountered. When the residents of the suburbs responded in a predominantly positive manner to their presence, the Dutch forces carried on into the busy and lively town centre.⁴⁵ The locals openly approached the troops and the Dutch also started conducting more patrols at night. A newly-arrived MP platoon improved the working relationship with the local police force again by regularly being present at police stations and intensifying joint patrols.⁴⁶

The remarkable turn-round in Ar Rumaythah was made possible by a number of factors, not just the change of personnel and a ‘new strategy’ on the part of the Dutch. Firstly, the appointment of a new city chief of police in December 2004 eased the still difficult relationship. Secondly, intensive cooperation with a company from the new police Emergency Battalion worked in 5 NLBG's favour. According to Bravo Company's Major Lagas, the new local paramilitary unit depended greatly on Dutch support and consequently acted “as a kind of second company” under his command.⁴⁷

Lagas also had at his disposal an additional platoon and a generous CIMIC budget.

Nevertheless, things would never be quite the same again. A small group of Sadrists had set themselves up in Ar Rumaythah during 2004 and the (irregular) threat level remained high. Both after the arrival and just before the departure of 5 NLBG, intelligence sources reported that attacks on the Dutch in the area were being prepared.⁴⁸ Major Lagas realised how fragile the success of 5 NLBG in Ar Rumaythah was when shortly after the January elections “trouble started brewing again.” Contacts with the local authorities became more difficult due to the loss of a common goal (peaceful elections) and the departure of the cooperative new police commander to the Netherlands to participate in the SSR training programme.⁴⁹ The imminent and well-known departure of the NLBG also removed a major motive for the Iraqis to cooperate. Shortly before the departure of Bravo Company, the threat in Ar Rumaythah therefore increased again. The base was to be handed over to the local authorities on 14 March 2005. Local sources reported that there were plans to give the Dutch a ‘good kick in the backside’ before they left, by attacking the base with mortars or laying an ambush.⁵⁰ As the NLBG’s intelligence section considered the attack highly likely, commander Van Dooren decided to vacate the camp five days early in the utmost secrecy.⁵¹

A second attack in Ar Rumaythah would have placed the entire Dutch operation in a negative light in one fell swoop, and for this reason the Dutch contingent adopted the same trick used by the CPA at the end of June 2004, when Paul Bremer had secretly brought forward the handover of sovereignty to the Iraqi interim government by a few days. NLBG also opted to apply this practical surprise tactic. On 9 March, the personnel of Bravo Company, who had been kept in the dark, were told to quickly pack their bags. Local officials were brought to the camp under the pretext of a meeting and were hastily given ‘the key’ to the base. Soon afterwards, the Dutch unit headed for the logistics base at Shaibah.⁵² Within the context of the relatively successful ending of the Dutch operation in Al Muthanna as a whole, this abrupt departure from Ar Rumaythah was illustrative of the different situation in that town.

Critical allies

The question to what extent stability in Al Muthanna should be ascribed to the Dutch way of operating can only be answered by putting the NLBG’s experience in its proper context. Treating the Dutch actions against the

background of events elsewhere in Iraq allows us to comment on whether a specific Dutch approach actually existed. Events in Ar Rumaythah demonstrated the difficulty of maintaining an open attitude and staying close to the local population in a situation of growing threat. And Ar Rumaythah was a calm backwater compared to insurgent hotbeds such as Amarah, Najaf, Ramadi, Fallujah and large sections of Baghdad.

The question not dealt with in the enthusiastic Dutch commentaries therefore, but which American journalist Norimitsu Onishi indeed did put to Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen of 4 NLBG, was whether an open Dutch approach might work in a place like the Iraqi capital. "It might have helped" the Dutch commander suggested. It was a highly speculative claim by an officer who even before his deployment to Iraq had publicly stated that, partly thanks to their experience with peace support operations, the Dutch were better able to win the trust of the Iraqis.⁵³ As an illustration, he referred, as was done before, to the loutish driving and aggressive behaviour of the American allies during convoy operations which, according to provincial chief of police Kareem, posed "the greatest insult to Iraqi dignity". Matthijssen advised the allies to display greater respect and understanding for the locals in general.

The suggestion of a more effective 'Dutch approach' thus seemed to exist by the grace of the comparison between the Netherlands' operations and the US *modus operandi*.⁵⁴ Yet was this comparison, in particular between the 130,000-plus US troops and the operation conducted by 1,300 Dutch forces in Al Muthanna, actually valid? The specific example of convoy operations was certainly not representative. These were conducted by poorly-informed troops – often from private security firms – who were passing through and bore no responsibility for the area of operations itself. They had a single goal: to get their cargo to Central Iraq without being hit by an IED or car bomb. A comparison of Dutch operations with the actions of US units who *did* bear responsibility for a geographical area would have made more sense, but would also have fallen short in so many respects as to become invalid – in particular when involving operations in the 'Sunni Triangle'.

Much more telling was the contrast that Dutch forces described between their own method of operating and that of the British in the same southern sector. For a long time, Basra, Iraq's second largest city, was an oasis of calm and stability too, compared to the turbulent capital Baghdad and the other areas under US command. The Blair government therefore also liked to present the British approach as a model.⁵⁵ Initially, the relative stability in the south was largely due to the positive attitude of the

Shiites towards Coalition troops in general, but it was also attributed to the de-escalating British military approach.⁵⁶ Using language similar to that of Dutch commanders, military historian and counter-insurgency specialist Rod Thornton claimed during a hearing in the House of Commons that “the British philosophy has always been that physical barriers prevent soldiers from picking up ‘on the street’ intelligence that can protect them from attack”.⁵⁷ The priority was winning ‘hearts and minds’, the classic term derived from the successful counter-insurgency campaign in Malaysia in the 1950s.

During his initial reconnaissance of Southern Iraq in May 2003, Lieutenant Colonel Swijman of 1 NLBG did indeed note that the British conducted patrols in a relaxed manner and in small groups. They carried their weapons on their backs and had exchanged their helmets for berets. At this time, they even patrolled without bulletproof vests. It was an inspiration for the Dutch deployment too. By contrast, the US Marines in Al Muthanna often operated in large groups, always wore helmets and full combat gear, and often carried their weapons pointing forward.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the British ultimately had trouble retaining their ‘light touch’. When the number of casualties among their troops started to rise, they tried not to distance themselves from the locals. But under the circumstances, British forces did not escape stricter protective measures, such as movements in heavily-armoured Warrior tracked vehicles and the occasional deployment of Challenger tanks. In November 2003, a battalion commander travelled from Basra to the province of Maysan to reconnoitre his area of operations in a Land Rover. Less than a year later, his unit could only travel the same route in a heavily-armed convoy and his men encountered nine roadside bombs in the space of twelve hours.⁵⁹ In order to retain and partly also regain their position, in the spring and summer of 2004 British forces became involved in heavy fighting that was more intensive than the battle to take Basra during the original invasion.

Great regional differences were to be found in the southern division’s sector. In As Zubayah, shortly after the second Sadr uprising in August 2004, the Iraqis still regularly greeted British soldiers with waves and thumbs-up gestures.⁶⁰ It was a different case in Maysan, where the influence of Mahdi Army fighters was the greatest and where even the heavily-infiltrated Iraqi police forces occasionally fired at British troops.⁶¹ The British had largely regained their positions and inflicted severe losses on the violent wing of the Sadr movement by about September 2004. Yet they were unable to repair the damage inflicted on their reputation. Hearing about these circumstances from various colleagues at divisional

headquarters led to 4 NLBG's Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen calling the situation in Al Muthanna, including Ar Rumaythah, "quite reasonable".⁶²

The Sadr revolts had also affected military and civilian authorities in the Italian area of operations of Dhi Qar much more than they had in Al Muthanna. The Italian contingent, at 3,000 military personnel the third largest within the multinational force, also came in for some criticism. "The Dutch did good patrolling, on foot," an American CPA employee said, simultaneously complaining about the Italians, who apparently only drove around in vehicles.⁶³ A British civilian colleague, Rory Stewart, saw no Italian military presence at all in large parts of Dhi Qar province. The number of CIMIC projects in the area was also negligible compared to those in the provinces of Maysan and Al Muthanna.⁶⁴

The British reserved their fiercest criticism for their US allies though.⁶⁵ Of this, the most notable comment came from Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, who had spent most of 2004 serving at the US-dominated MNF headquarters in Baghdad. In a scathing article, 'Changing the Army for counterinsurgency operations', published in late 2005, he singled out the fundamental attitude and organisational culture of the US Army as the main obstacles to a successful campaign against the uprisings in Iraq.⁶⁶ According to Aylwin-Foster, the conventionally-minded US Army was weighed down by "a stiflingly hierarchical outlook, a pre-disposition to offensive operations, and a sense of duty that required all issues to be confronted head-on".

In his view, the armed forces were inflexible and US troops isolated themselves from the locals by concentrating in large bases, in "mini-Americas" where they lived in relative luxury. If they did go outside the wire, they applied very little cultural sensitivity. The emphasis was far too much on intelligence gathering using technological resources. They neglected to gather information via regular foot patrols, and almost all major US operations were reactive, with a strong preference for major search operations ('sweeps') aimed at killing or capturing rebels. The Americans supposedly also neglected to create a secure environment for inhabitants – the central theme in classic counter-insurgency doctrines. In the opinion of Aylwin-Foster the US's 'direct approach', which focused on identifying, fixing and destroying the enemy, derived from the American preference for quick and measurable results.

The British on the other hand traditionally preferred the 'indirect approach', with a strong predilection for non-military resources and tasks, such as policing, administrative measures and political compromises.

It was the difference between fighting the rebels and countering the rebellion. This criticism corresponded with that of many counter-insurgency specialists. In the period after 2005, this group started to make more of a mark on military operations in Iraq. With his claim that – just as during the Vietnam war – the us armed forces lacked the capacity to adapt to the enemy, Aylwin-Foster nevertheless underestimated the us's ability to learn. He was not the only one.⁶⁷ The inclusion of his biting critical article in the influential us Army's *Military Review* was the first contraindication of what he argued. So was the moderate and even assenting response from some influential Army officers in Iraq and the United States.⁶⁸ There was apparently room for criticism in the us armed forces. The organisation proved its critics wrong by displaying increasing flexibility and understanding for irregular warfare and counter-insurgency principles from 2006 onwards.

British self-criticism and exit

Aylwin-Foster's remarks caused most irritation in creating the impression that his country was doing better in Iraq, while omitting to stress sufficiently the much more difficult operational conditions in the us sector in Central and Northern Iraq. Yet by this time, 2005, the British 'model' too had largely lost its sheen due to pressure from the Shiite power struggle in the south and the rise of increasingly violent militias. The basic attitude and tactical reflexes of the British troops, to some extent conditioned by their experiences in Northern Ireland and during peace support operations in the 1990s, ought to have made them better suited to stabilising occupied Iraq than many of their us colleagues. Many specialists outside the uk agreed on this.⁶⁹ Yet the overall British effort in Iraq had major flaws. A more population-centred approach, relative self-restraint and the ability to improvise compensated for the structural shortfall in personnel. But the situation was ultimately exacerbated by the lack of a coherent strategy and a defective civil contribution, according to an evaluation by the British Army's Land Warfare Centre, which appraised uk operations in Southern Iraq from May 2003 up to the general elections in January 2005.⁷⁰

The British self-criticism was harsh. Like the us, the uk had formally accepted the status of occupying power, but had subsequently acted insufficiently according to the spirit of the Law of Occupation. The British government took military responsibility for the four Southern provinces, but with a lack of clarity on non-military tasks. Occupation policy was left

almost entirely to the Americans. For a long time the British government also hoped, in vain, for a major role for the UN or other individual allies in the interim government and in the reconstruction of its Southern sector. This resulted in tardy and inadequate preparations for the occupation and long delays in rebuilding administration and essential facilities.

The British government also paid little more than lip service to the so-called ‘comprehensive approach’, which was supposed to integrate the four lines of operation of security, administration, the economy and facilities. It invested many hundreds of millions pounds in the military effort with respect to security, but (initially) spent only a fraction on the economic line of operation, on which security depended to a large extent. In terms of personnel, the UK’s contribution to the CPA remained below target until the end of 2003.⁷¹ In the early stages, a minor Coalition partner such as Denmark contributed pro rata more civilian personnel and funds to the interim administration and reconstruction than the British themselves.⁷² Moreover, insufficient compensation for the shortfall in civilian capacity was provided in the form of CIMIC-personnel and funds.

Criticism of the defective planning and implementation of the Iraq policy did not come just from the military. Hilary Synnott, the British civilian CPA representative in Southern Iraq, thought that his country had embarked on a state-building adventure of colonial proportions for which it was completely unprepared. To his dismay, the Blair government continued to leave administrative responsibility to Washington, even after CPA chief Paul Bremer had repeatedly let it be known that he allocated a low priority to the ‘peaceful’ south.⁷³ During an inquiry into developments in Iraq, the British House of Commons also singled out short-term vision and indecision on reconstruction and reform of the security services as a “key failing of the British effort”. As elsewhere in Iraq, recruitment of high numbers of Iraqis for the security services was given priority over quality.⁷⁴

While at the end of 2003 the Americans were again talking of ‘the war in Iraq’, both the British government and its armed forces were experiencing difficulties in categorising the operation. In the first year of occupation, Operation Telic had been viewed as a peace support operation and was certainly not approached as a type of temporary military rule. The British often used the term stability operation, which also found its way into Dutch usage in 2003.⁷⁵ They adhered to this classification even when violence against the Iraqi authorities and the Coalition increased sharply from 2004 onwards. The British faced armed rebellion, but in spite of their extensive historical experience with this phenomenon they

were remarkably slow in openly acknowledging that they were caught up in a complex counter-insurgency campaign.⁷⁶

In the course of 2004, the UK-US effort in Iraq was increasingly labelled as counter-insurgency. Yet the complexity and diversity of the Iraqi insurgency, the constant shortage of personnel and the high level of violence meant that the UK seemed unable to benefit from past experience. The British reputation for being successful counterinsurgents was due to their effective strategy in Malaysia in the course of the 1950s and in Northern Ireland since the mid-1970s, where they were known to have eventually balanced military and civilian efforts. They were generally praised for intermittently applying force to curb uprisings or – as eventually in Northern Ireland – for creating the flexibility and time to solve a conflict via political means by maintaining “an acceptable level of violence”. Historians and counter-insurgency experts often contrasted this British method of operating with the failed US strategy in Vietnam in the 1960s, which allegedly focused primarily on killing the enemy. In the colonial context, however, counter-insurgency usually involved fighting a single, more or less centrally-led rebel movement which used guerrilla tactics, terror and subversion to create a new (often communist or nationalist) order. The British Army doctrine for counter-insurgency, as distributed to units in Iraq in 2004, dated from 1995 and was largely based on theories and principles learned from such past conflicts in Malaysia, Vietnam, Aden and Northern Ireland.

There seemed nothing inherently wrong with the basic principles laid down in this doctrine – such as having a clear and attainable political objective, the use of proportional force, an integrated civil-military implementation mechanism for a comprehensive plan, separating the insurgents from the local population, the key role of intelligence gathering and a gradual, patient approach. Yet the parameters for operations against an irregular opponent were fundamentally different in modern times. Here, too, the enemy was largely invisible and urban areas of operations provided interesting parallels with operations in Belfast, but in Iraq international troops had to operate as outsiders without ‘reliable’ civilian partners and with a minimum knowledge of the language and culture. In this respect, a comparison with the US intervention in Vietnam was more relevant than the formative British experiences in Malaysia and Northern Ireland.

In addition, there was not just a single enemy, but a diffuse urban guerrilla mix with religiously-inspired, nationalist and criminal elements, in which several groups with varying motives had a stake in striving both

to create a new order and preserve the chaotic status quo.⁷⁷ What hindered the application of the ever so relevant counter-insurgency principles in Iraq was the key question of how 'foreign' military personnel could provide effective support to weak, dysfunctional and corrupt local administrators and police forces. State-building and counter-insurgency went hand-in-hand in Iraq, but the two leading Coalition partners performed poorly in both these disciplines and were never able to solve their main strategic dilemma of supporting a host nation regime which lacked legitimacy.

Like other Coalition partners, the British hoped that the violence in Iraq would decrease in the wake of the January 2005 elections. Since the start of the invasion they had faced 86 fatalities and the Blair government was coming under increasing domestic pressure to bring the troops home.⁷⁸ The elections had no lasting positive effect on stability, however. After a brief lull, the Sadr movement in fact gained in strength and the number of British casualties rose due to a growing number of attacks using improved IED technology, often developed with help from Iran.⁷⁹ Troop reductions seemed premature at that point, because it was precisely due to a constant shortage of personnel that the British allowed the Shiite militias room to display their authority. The hasty SSR efforts which had focused on quantity rather than quality had also enabled militia members to infiltrate the official security services en masse.⁸⁰

In October 2005, a referendum of the Iraqi people approved a new constitution, after which the first constitutional elections were held on 15 December. This time, Sunnis participated massively. As many Iraqis again voted along religious and ethnic lines, the Shiite alliance dominated by SCIRI and Dawa won a convincing victory. The Shiites and Kurds again formed a government, although internal disagreements meant that it took months to form a new cabinet. The candidate supported by the Sadrists, Prime Minister Al Jafaari, ultimately ceded to the new Dawa leader, Nouri al Maliki. Under his leadership, the first permanent Iraqi government was installed in the midst of growing violence in May 2006. The power struggle intensified between Shiite parties. At the same time, violence between Shiites and Sunnis also increased, following an attack on the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. This act of terror against an important Shiite shrine led to a new round of sectarian violence, which now began to take on the unmistakable characteristics of a civil war.

The downward spiral of violence caused the number of troop-contributing nations within the Coalition to diminish rapidly. As early as mid-2004, the Spanish had withdrawn their 1,500-strong force, and

after the Dutch announcement that it was leaving a number of other small countries within MND South-East decided to withdraw too. In March 2005, Italy announced it would gradually start reducing its brigade in Dhi Qar later that year.⁸¹ After the British-Australian contingent had handed over responsibility for security in Al Muthanna to Iraqi security forces in the following year, the Japanese withdrew their humanitarian aid battalion as well.

By now, British troops were barely in control of the south and were facing increasingly severe set-backs. During the first two weeks of its deployment in the spring of 2006, 20 Armoured Brigade suffered seven fatalities in a total of 41 attacks. Partly due to less-frequent patrols, there was a sharp increase in mortar and rocket attacks on the bases.⁸² Lawlessness increased in spite of determined attempts by the British, in conjunction with the Iraqi authorities, to cleanse the Iraqi security services in Basra in subsequent months. In October 2006, the British Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Richard Dannatt, shocked the British government by publicly pleading for a rapid withdrawal. He claimed that the British military presence only worsened the security situation.⁸³ Instead, the British commenced a gradual reduction of their forces. Even though they spent more and more time under armour and within their bases in the year 2007, they suffered a higher number of casualties than ever before. MND South-East left its last base in the city of Basra in September of that year. From that time, almost all the remaining 5,500 British troops operated from the main camp situated at Basra airport.

After Al Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan, Basra was the last of the four southern provinces in which the British handed responsibility for security over to the Iraqis. That autumn, US strategic analyst Anthony Cordesman provocatively asserted that the British had essentially been defeated. What followed in the United States was a flood of criticism of what was perceived to be an overly detached and lenient attitude on the part of the British.⁸⁴ In the spring of 2008, they played a modest supporting role in the bold and large-scale offensive in which the Iraqi authorities, aided by US forces, succeeded in ousting the Mahdi Army from the streets of Basra, to the great relief of most of its residents.⁸⁵ In late May 2009, the British armed forces left Iraq altogether and handed over all responsibility to the Americans, in order to be able to concentrate on the fight against the Taliban in Helmand province, Southern Afghanistan.

Al Muthanna after the departure of the Dutch

The situation in Al Muthanna presented a much brighter picture, also after the Dutch departed. In contrast to the situation in neighbouring provinces the British could return to their favourite *modus operandi*. “It’s not war, it’s peacekeeping,” a Captain of the Light Dragoons said, while his men conducted peaceful patrols in the busy As Samawah market in August 2005 and politely drank the cups of sweet tea they were offered. Thanks to the arrival of the Australian Al Muthanna Task Group (AMTG) in May 2005, the 1,000-strong British-led Task Force Eagle was now almost as large as the NLBGS had been. The British and Australians modestly ascribed the calm in the province to the population and to the main tribal leaders. Taskforce commander Colonel Hugh Blackman asserted that about thirteen sheikhs had control over almost everything going on in the province. He therefore recognised the importance of devoting attention to the tribal leaders and treating them with respect. The formal government and the tribal rule and law system continued to operate in parallel and the British – just like the Dutch before them – did not intend to challenge or change that. Governor Al Hassani ruled with an iron fist. This was just as well, Blackman noted, because “this place is like herding cats”.⁸⁶

Former CPA administrator for Al Muthanna Colonel Maurice Bulmer returned for a second tour in Iraq two years after he had left. From MND South-East headquarters he witnessed how the Al Muthanna police performed better and acted in a less intimidating fashion than their Basra counterparts.⁸⁷ The relative stability in ‘his’ former province did not mean, however, that things were always peaceful or that the security services had matured. Things still went wrong. Nervous policemen opened fire on agitated demonstrators during demonstrations in June and August 2005, for example. Three people were killed and several dozen injured, including a considerable number of policemen. Governor Al Hassani dismissed Chief of Police Kareem and replaced him with another member of the Al Zayadi tribe. After all, it would be unwise to disturb the cherished tribal balance. The British suspected that a second shooting incident after this had been provoked by Kareem’s followers. Others blamed the Sadrists. Following an incident in July 2006, in which a violent group of 300 recently-dismissed policemen stormed the Governate Council building, the new chief of police resigned and Al Hassani came under severe pressure to step down.⁸⁸

In spite of these difficulties, at this time the ‘province of peace’ provided a rare positive Iraqi news item. In July 2006, Al Muthanna made

international headlines when it became the first of the eighteen provinces in Iraq where, in the presence of Prime Minister Al Maliki, the security services took full responsibility for internal security. The British political adviser to Task Force Eagle stressed that this was possible because As Samawah was “Sleepy Hollow” compared to the other provincial capitals, although it had taken a great deal of work to keep it that way.⁸⁹ There had been no casualties among Coalition forces since August 2004. After the handover, the Australians continued operations as Overwatch Battle Group (West), a rapid reaction force which could provide support on request from outside Al Muthanna, at Tallil Airbase in Dhi Qar. An Australian Army Training Team continued the SSR programme on a smaller scale.

Immediately following the withdrawal of the foreign troops, the security situation in the towns of Al Muthanna deteriorated briefly. Ar Rumaythah stayed true to its reputation as a rebel hotbed, as the Australians were attacked during a visit to the Iraqi army base (the former Dutch base) on 26 September 2006. During a gunfight lasting nearly an hour, a few of the attackers were probably killed but there were no Australian casualties. The Diggers eventually had to retreat under fire.⁹⁰ An illustration of the gradual improvement in quality of the Iraqi security forces was the fact that Overwatch Battle Group (West) never deployed. Yet Al Muthanna was not immune to the violent power struggle raging in the country either. On 20 August 2007, governor Al Hassani was killed by a powerful roadside bomb while travelling from Ar Rumaythah, where he lived, to his office in As Samawah. His death, just like a similar attack on the SCIRI governor of neighbouring province Al Qadisiyah in the same month, was attributed to the Sadrists.⁹¹

In March 2007, looking back on the almost four years since the invasion, a number of Al Muthanna residents quoted in a local newspaper showed little regret at the departure of the foreign troops. They certainly did not bear a grudge, but Iraqi responsibility for security came as a relief to many. However, they did regret the departure of the Japanese, whose reconstruction tasks and financial injections, in spite of the often cumbersome implementation, were sorely missed due to the employment they provided.⁹² After the initial start-up difficulties in 2004, the Japanese had eventually spent hundreds of millions of us dollars with increasing effectiveness on healthcare and water and electricity supply. Like the Dutch, however, the Japanese did little to fulfil promises of remaining involved in the desert province’s development after their departure. Nevertheless, the provincial authorities managed to attract foreign investment in the cement

industry and the electricity network. With unemployment at 60 per cent and half the population living below the poverty line, such investment was sorely needed.⁹³

The us in Iraq, 2003-2011

When Dutch troops left Iraq exactly two years after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the initial euphoria at the simple overthrow of the Baath regime had evaporated. Little also remained of the most prominent justifications for the war.⁹⁴ The allies had discovered no weapons of mass destruction and the alleged link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaida had never existed.⁹⁵ In the us, the Bush administration would probably have been forgiven this had the stabilisation of Iraq gone more smoothly, or at least followed the pattern seen in Al Muthanna. However, due to the lack of progress, the growing violence, the rising number of us troops killed and – to a much lesser extent – the large number of Iraqi casualties, us president George W. Bush sustained severe political damage after his re-election at the end of 2004. The violence reached an absolute nadir in 2006. At that point, the us was close to losing the war in Iraq. However, the catastrophic events concealed the fact that the Americans had started to adapt to the enemy. The us military learned from its mistakes and was progressively applying historical counter-insurgency lessons in its operations by now.⁹⁶ At the end of 2005, Brigadier Aylwin-Foster admitted that little of his previous severe criticism was still valid.

From a us perspective, the years following the capture of Baghdad could roughly be divided into three episodes. It was not entirely coincidental that these corresponded to the periods of overall command by Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, General George Casey and General David Petraeus. The first period was characterised by a fickle occupation policy and a tendency, born out of haste and lack of forces, to focus on the destruction of the insurgents. In spite of major initiatives such as CERP and at times deviating operational concepts applied by units such as the 101st Airborne Division and the us Marine Corps – and of course smaller contingents such as the British and the Dutch – most population-centric initiatives remained random and disjointed.

In the second period, shortly after his appointment in the summer of 2004, General Casey, in conjunction with the Iraqi government, drew up a campaign plan that finally linked security, democratisation, economic development and communication together as lines of operation. It was

the first comprehensive campaign plan drawn up by the Coalition.⁹⁷ Also, the highest military official in Iraq surrounded himself with an independent-minded advisory team of highly-educated (former) officers, often specialists in countering insurgencies, and in the course of 2005 improved the operational mentoring of the army and the police. In order to stimulate civil-military cooperation, the US State Department introduced Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), a concept which had been tried out in Afghanistan with some success. The deployment of these mixed civil-military reconstruction and advisory teams meant that for the first time since the departure of the CPA there was again a substantial civil representation of diplomats and USAID employees in the provinces.⁹⁸ In 2007 Al Muthanna was also allocated its own PRT, which operated out of Tallil Airbase and from an US Army Combat Outpost along Route Tampa.

In spite of the innovations under General Casey, there were two dominant and constant factors which hindered progress. Firstly, the 140,000 US troops continued to operate from large Forward Operating Bases outside the towns (even more and more so) and they almost always displayed a presence in populated areas in armoured vehicles. Secondly, the Iraqis were to take over security tasks as quickly as possible, ready or not. The Coalition's emphasis on SSR remained valid, but its primary motives – troop reductions, minimising its own losses, shrinking its network of bases and as fast an exit as possible – prevented the transition from being properly implemented.⁹⁹

After four years of disastrous policy, President Bush announced a radical new pacification strategy on 10 January 2007. It was a case of do or die for the US in Iraq.¹⁰⁰ The most controversial was the temporary injection of an additional 28,500 combat troops and a greater civilian component, which led to the new US strategy being nicknamed 'the Surge'. The new commander in Iraq, General Petraeus and his civilian counterpart, ambassador Ryan Crocker, had to prove that the measures were bearing fruit within six months. The Surge's second element was just as important: the widespread introduction of counter-insurgency tactics, which focused on securing the Iraqi people rather than merely the destruction of the enemy. This was done by better integrating US operations with those of the Iraqi security forces and by having units operate out of dozens of smaller bases in the towns. Instead of just 'clearing' residential districts, they also focussed on 'holding' population centres by stabilising them in order to consolidate local successes by engaging in reconstruction ('building').¹⁰¹

The quite successful application of what became known as the Clear-

Hold-Build concept would have been impossible without the third and most controversial element of the new strategy. The us invested heavily in alliances with previously openly-hostile Sunni tribe leaders, which had already been entered into in 2006 on a smaller scale. 'Turning' Sunni tribes against Al Qaeda in Iraq, and involving urban civilian militias in clearing and holding areas, facilitated the success of 2007. But it also made it fragile. The violent excesses of the predominantly foreign-led Al Qaeda in Iraq drove tribal leaders and urban militias to forge an improbable alliance with the us. Yet the cornered Sunnis still lacked faith in the Shiite and Kurd-dominated Iraqi government. Also, the truce between the Americans and the Mahdi Army, which after the attack on the Golden Mosque had committed many sectarian murders, remained controversial, although it was one of the main reasons for the drop in violence in 2007.

The daring Coalition strategy seemed to have passed the litmus test when the number of us and Iraqi casualties dropped sharply in mid-2007. The spiral of violence of the past few years had been broken. The Iraqi authorities were able to establish themselves in this relative lull and even acquire enough self-confidence to tackle Al Sadr and his militia in the spring of 2008. The new us government under President Barack Obama continued the policy. In spite of an immeasurable number of unsolved problems, a large section of the us armed forces was able to leave Iraq in 2010, followed by a definite withdrawal in 2011.

The 'Dutch touch'

The British and American experiences in Iraq between 2003 and 2009 underlined in retrospect how much had gone well during the twenty months that Al Muthanna had been under Dutch rule in 2003-2005. At the same time, the complex political dynamics and explosion of sectarian, criminal and religious violence elsewhere in Iraq should have tempered triumphant claims with respect to the extent to which the Netherlands had been able to influence the positive developments in the peripheral province. The embracing of the term 'Dutch approach' in the Netherlands smacked of a lack of modesty. It surely could not have been the main explanation for what seemed a remarkable tactical success in the context of a great allied strategic failure?

Trumpeting a 'Dutch approach' seemed to be an example of what is known in social psychology as attribution theory. Extensive statistical study has shown that – unsurprisingly – people have a strong tendency to

attribute success to themselves, while they prefer to attribute their failures to circumstances. They tend to do the exact opposite when it comes to other people. If someone else succeeds, 'then that must be due to positive circumstances', but if that person fails, then it must be their own fault. Instant self-evaluation would therefore appear to be unreliable – also in the case of the Dutch deployment to Iraq, where the attribution theory crossed over to the domain of public relations.¹⁰²

The As Samawah resident who in December 2003 had told a Dutch tv reporter that the Netherlands had chosen the region because it was calm, and that it would remain so after their departure, was proven right.¹⁰³ Borrowing the analogy used by 2 NLBG's commander Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar, the province was certainly no island in rough seas, but it did seem a bit like a peninsula. With 2 per cent of the national electorate in a peripheral region without mineral resources, it hardly made for a magnet for extremists and terrorists. "The stars were favourably aligned in Al Muthanna," had been the consensus at the CPA office as far back as 2003-2004.¹⁰⁴ The desert province was very poor, but blessed with a homogenous population, a geographical position which minimised Iranian influence and it fell under the tempering influence of traditional tribal ties.

"The 'Dutch approach' in a broader sense could never have worked as well in As Zubayah as it did in Al Muthanna," former political adviser Michel Rentenaar said in retrospect in relation to the combination of administrative reforms and the open attitude towards the locals. The large industrial suburb of Basra, where Dutch troops could also have settled in the summer of 2003, had a more heterogeneous population and the undermining influence of Iran and of radical Shiite groups was much greater.¹⁰⁵ Former CPA administrator Colonel Bulmer also attributed the calm in Al Muthanna to a combination of favourable local conditions and Dutch operations, which incidentally reminded him very much of the original British approach.¹⁰⁶

If the calm conditions in Al Muthanna could at least be partly ascribed to the Dutch effort, to what extent could this *modus operandi* be traced to a deliberate national approach? Patrols and the open posture towards the population were after all only part of this. The full range of Dutch tasks in Al Muthanna comprised a mix of executive and support tasks for the police and local government, reform of the security services, fighting irregular opponents, and reconstruction activities. There was a shift in accent over time for each of these elements. To what extent did this broad set of tasks correspond to the operational instructions formulated in The Hague at the outset of the operation? And to what extent did the subsequent government

policy and direction of the units match up with the evolution of the actual operation 'on the ground'? In short, was there a plan, or did the ability to improvise at the tactical level form the basis for the achievements in Iraq?

What was certain was that The Hague insisted on strict compliance with the instructions on the use of force. In addition to proportional force, an open attitude to the Iraqi people was applauded, monitored and occasionally encouraged throughout the operation. However, this *modus operandi* differed substantially from the formal assignment issued to 1 NLBG at the start. The cabinet's letter to Parliament of 6 June 2003 in fact emphasised a detached *modus operandi*, in which patrols and checkpoints would be kept to a minimum, and as far away from the population as possible. The Dutch Parliament was told that too emphatic a military presence was to be avoided in the towns.¹⁰⁷ The idea behind this was to avoid at all times the impression that the Dutch were participating in the occupation. This operational concept proved to be unworkable during the occupation phase until the summer of 2004 however, and was dropped by the tactical commanders. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman of 1 NLBG in fact adhered to the opposite line of his British division commander in Basra and displayed a maximum instead of minimum presence. He did all he could to increase the visibility of his infantry when the local community made an urgent appeal to have more troops patrol the streets and asked him to tackle serious crime.

In fact, the *modus operandi* that the cabinet in its letter to Parliament emphasised as an important course of action also conflicted with what was later presented (and boasted) as the 'Dutch approach'. A detached method of operating would after all never have provided the human intelligence to be able to conduct effective operations. Military personnel only obtained information by constantly moving among the Iraqis and by making public security a priority. 'Intel-driven operations' would have been nothing more than a hollow phrase if military personnel had stayed out of the towns and isolated themselves on distant operating bases.

This was made even clearer after the transfer of sovereignty at the end of June 2004, when 4 NLBG indeed switched, in accordance with MNF-I policy, to a more detached *modus operandi* – an approach which corresponded to the one formulated over a year earlier for 1 NLBG. Even in peaceful Al Muthanna it turned out to be too soon for the international troops to fulfil such a role of 'distant fire brigade'. The local security services were far too weak. Growing dissatisfaction among Iraqis about the state of affairs in their country had also been decreasing the flow of information since early

2004. The Dutch intelligence position deteriorated further when 4 NLBG reduced its presence in the towns. This gap was recognised in the allocation from the Netherlands of a great deal of extra intelligence capacity in the wake of the Sadr uprising in August.

Also with respect to administration, crime-fighting and civil-military cooperation, the assignment and policy deviated greatly from the reality on the ground. In order to ensure broad political support, the Netherlands was more emphatic in its adoption of a status of non-occupying power than other Coalition partners such as Denmark and Italy. The artificial distinction was made in spite of warnings from experts that it was both legally untenable and practically irrelevant. The list of Dutch caveats – the longest of all the partners within MND South-East – proved to be unworkable. In particular by insisting on excluding civil administrative and police tasks, the Dutch government put its deployed personnel in a tough position. The military forces and the political adviser were forced to be highly creative in conducting their assignments. Policymakers neglected to go back to the drawing board even after the realisation dawned in The Hague that the mission design was indeed flawed.

In addition to adequate tactical reflexes and the relatively calm situation in the province, the predominantly successful operations by the successive Dutch battle groups in occupied Iraq can be ascribed to their very flexible interpretation of the defective national mandate. The Dutch in Al Muthanna operated on the edge of and beyond what was permitted – albeit always in the spirit of what their British divisional commander intended. In particular the first contingent had to work its way around several restrictions, most of all with respect to executive police tasks. In the occupation phase until June 2004, Dutch military personnel tended to package crime-fighting measures, in particular the large-scale targeting operations, as force protection.

The ban on involvement in civil administrative matters and the explicit rejection of the British request to provide civilian personnel for the CPA also forced the Dutch armed forces to improvise. In doing so, they often exceeded the limits of the mandate. Whether they liked it or not, as the most powerful party in a power vacuum the military commanders in provinces such as Al Muthanna effectively became the local ‘rulers’. Unlike the Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence, the Iraqis barely distinguished between civil and military authority, occupier or stabilisation force. Although the administrative role gradually decreased from 1 NLBG to 2 NLBG, commanders Swijgman and Oppelaar were both very

generous in their support for governance, as they understood that a more or less representative and stable local government would play a key role in securing the province. They were able to restrict their own executive role by leaving this task to the first political adviser, Michel Rentenaar, who played a key part in building the local administration. The rapid succession of provincial CPA administrators and poor performance of one of them at a crucial stage meant that Rentenaar's role became even more decisive.

Irrespective of the Dutch government's tendency to distance itself from the occupying authorities, the first Dutch rotations provided a relatively successful example of how an integrated, civil-military approach to crisis response operations ought to function. In the years following the Dutch departure from Iraq, this 'comprehensive approach' would become a focal point of Dutch foreign and security policy and military doctrine, but in Al Muthanna the priority was, for specific political reasons, still the opposite, by artificially demarcating and separating the military and civil dimensions. The Netherlands only wanted to take responsibility for the security aspects of the mission, in order to facilitate other organisations in reconstruction activities. Any involvement with the civil domain had to directly serve the security operation rather than – and herein lies the paradox – serve the strategic end objective: the rebuilding of Iraq.

This official Dutch approach to the mission also restricted the CIMIC instrument. The Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs underestimated the importance of CIMIC in Iraq.¹⁰⁸ The key was the belief in progress and the good intentions of the foreign occupiers. The short and medium-term projects conducted by Dutch troops were the only concrete results at a time when the CPA was hardly leaving a trace. As a result doubts about the good intentions of 'the foreigners' grew sharply. In the meantime, the Dutch made themselves popular by spending many millions of dollars from (non-Dutch) CERP and CPA budgets. The results were credited to the NLBG. It was no coincidence that these 'Dutch' projects featured prominently in the Letter to Parliament and in speeches on the Netherlands' achievements in Iraq.

In spite of various large-scale projects, the inflated CIMIC effort obviously failed to compensate for the lack of structural development aid. The Ministry of Defence did send some extra CIMIC personnel, but the lack of a suitable national policy as well as a lack of strategy and planning which transcended the four-monthly rotations, meant that Dutch efforts remained *ad hoc*. This was particularly obvious in the most vulnerable period, after the transfer of sovereignty in June 2004 and prior to the second Sadr uprising in August. In spite of timely warnings from the field,

the flow of project funds dried up and the Netherlands stubbornly refused to increase its CIMIC budget in order to guarantee continuity. Only after the crisis in Ar Rumaythah did part of the required construction funds become available. In general, the Netherlands was not yet sufficiently focused on an integrated and balanced civil-military approach. A striking aspect was the much greater willingness to give additional funds and personnel for the building of new Iraqi security services as part of the Security Sector Reform effort, on account of this being viewed as part of the exit strategy.

Therefore, when it came to the Dutch *modus operandi*, the most crucial success factors in Al Muthanna were not the result of a specific and deliberate national approach at all. Success was made possible by creative and ad hoc solutions at the tactical level within the general guidelines and plans of the allied higher echelons in Basra and Baghdad, despite national regulations. Like their colleagues in Washington and London, politicians and policymakers in The Hague seemed ill-prepared for the largely predictable challenges in the power vacuum created in the wake of the 2003 invasion. The Netherlands equally had no ready answer to the power struggle in the Shiite south and the unexpectedly vehement Sadrist uprisings in 2004. The restrained reflexes of the Dutch fitted the situation reasonably well as, thanks to the tribal regime, these revolts passed Al Muthanna by almost completely, and neither the fragile peace in the ‘Dutch province’ nor the relatively subtle Dutch operational style was ever really put to the test. Therefore, the success of the subsequent NLBGS was conditions-driven rather than the result of a deliberate strategy or brilliantly improvised method on the part of the Dutch.

A gentle occupation

The question remains how to categorise Dutch operations in Al Muthanna in retrospect. Confusion continued to reign about the nature of the military deployment even several years afterwards. The suggestion at the start of the operation in 2003 that it was a deployment in the tradition of peacekeeping persisted stubbornly even after the Dutch troops had left Al Muthanna in 2005. Newspaper *de Volkskrant* spoke of the British taking over a “peacekeeping task” from the Dutch and of a near perfect “peace operation” right up to the end.¹⁰⁹ In the context of the Iraq War, this seemed almost cynical.

General terms such as ‘peace operation’ and ‘peace support operation’, as well as the more specific categories of peace enforcement, peacekeeping and peace building which the UN has used since the 1990s in an attempt

to create clarity in the instrument kit of international crisis response management, clearly did not fit the bill in Iraq. They could not be used as the operation did not involve international crisis resolution but rather an intervention and subsequent occupation by a coalition of nations. The fact that these terms were nevertheless often used in the Netherlands demonstrates that the conceptual framework for international crisis response operations had been stretched for public relations purposes to such an extent that the non-forceful participation in an occupation and the role in a struggle against armed insurgents apparently also fell into these categories. It is revealing in this respect that the deployed Dutch military personnel were awarded the Commemorative Medal for Peace Operations on their return.

Official documents of the Ministry of Defence consistently used the neutral term ‘crisis response operation’. The descriptions ‘stability operation’ and ‘stabilisation force’ did catch on to some extent because they described a significant part of the Dutch troops’ tasks. Nevertheless, the mission in Al Muthanna encompassed a great deal more. During ‘SFIR’ – a name exclusively used in the Netherlands – the Dutch armed forces became acquainted with a new generation of complex and multidimensional international operations, characterised by many interconnected, overlapping and mutually-reinforcing military and non-military elements. The mission in Al Muthanna was a ‘light’ version of what military scholars a few years before had started to call “three-block warfare”, “mosaic wars”, “hybrid wars”, “war amongst the people” or, in this specific case returning to the existing concept which seems to describe it best, “complex counter-insurgency” or “counter-insurgency plus”.¹¹⁰

The historic parallels with colonial pacification, foreign (military) rule, occupation and the post-Second World War decolonisation era were rife, but no single case seemed to fit. David Kilcullen, an Australian counter-insurgency adviser to General Petraeus, therefore suggested the following to support his ‘hybrid warfare’ theory in historical terms:

“If we were to draw historical analogies, we might say that operations in Iraq are like trying to defeat the Viet Cong (insurgency) while simultaneously rebuilding Germany (nation building following war and dictatorship), keeping the peace in the Balkans (communal and sectarian conflict) and defeating the IRA (domestic terrorism).”¹¹¹

The Dutch in Al Muthanna were spared such an explosive cocktail. While historical analogies are usually risky, the military mission in their part of

Iraq at best resembled Kilcullen's elements of 'Germany post-1945' with a touch of 'Northern Ireland's Troubles'. The 'Dutch' province required a stabilisation operation with a mix of administrative development, large-scale reconstruction efforts with – from a Dutch perspective – an unprecedented budget, Security Sector Reform on an equally exceptional scale, executive police operations with occasional large-scale cordon, search and arrest operations and, where necessary, direct action against irregular opponents. This mix was largely the result of what the different NLBGS encountered during their tours and the way they adapted to the standards set within the Coalition.

The Dutch nevertheless gave the operation certain national accents. In Al Muthanna, they were afforded the luxury of treading relatively softly. Therefore, the overall result of the mission can best be characterised by echoing the title from the semi-autobiographical debut novel by actor-author Dirk Bogarde. As an officer in the British Indian Army that occupied key parts of the Netherlands East Indies after the Japanese surrender in 1945, Bogarde (also) experienced a dynamic mix of military governance, peacekeeping, reconstruction and counter-insurgency after the fall of a despotic regime. It was an experience that he referred to as "a gentle occupation."¹¹² The Netherlands armed forces' mission in Al Muthanna could not be described more accurately.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

AIVD	<i>Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst</i> (General Intelligence and Security Service)
BSB	<i>Brigade Speciale Beveiligingsopdrachten</i> (Special Security Missions Brigade)
CENTCOM	Central Command
CDA	<i>Christen-Democratisch Appèl</i> (Christian-Democratic Party)
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CERP	Commander's Emergency Response Program
CF	Coalition Forces
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIMIC	civil-military co-operation
CIS	communications and information systems
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CRC	crowd and riot control
CSE	CIMIC Support Element
CTIVD	<i>Commissie van Toezicht betreffende de Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdiensten</i>
D66	<i>Democraten 66</i> (political party)
DCBC	<i>Defensie Crisisbeheersingscentrum</i> (Defence Staff Crisis Management Centre)
DOC	Defence Operations Centre
DTDF	Division Temporary Detainment Facility
FLT	Field Liaison Team
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FPS	Facility Protection Service
GST	Government Support Team
GT	Governorate Team
HUMINT	human intelligence
HVT	High-Value Target
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IBP	Iraqi border police
ICDC	Iraqi Civil Defence Corps
IECI	Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
ING	Iraqi National Guard
IP	Iraqi Police
IRDC	Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISTAR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance

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JFIT	Joint Forward Interrogation Team
KCT	<i>Korps Commandotroepen</i> (Royal Netherlands Army Special Forces Regiment)
KTS	Knock Talk Search
LPF	<i>Lijst Pim Fortuyn</i> (political party)
MCD	Mediacentrum Defensie
MIVD	<i>Militaire Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst</i> (Military Intelligence and Security Service)
MND	Multinational Division
MNF-I	Multi-National Force Iraq
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MP	Military Police / Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NIMH	Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie
NLBG	Netherlands Battle Group
NLDET	Netherlands Detachment
NSE	National Support Element
ORHA	Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance
OM	<i>Openbaar Ministerie</i> (Public Prosecution Service)
PJCC	Provincial Joint Coordination Center
PJOC	Provincial Joint Operations Center
POD	Point of Debarkation
Polad	Political Adviser
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
PSE	PsyOps Support Element
PSU	Police Support Unit
PvDA	<i>Partij van de Arbeid</i> (Labour Party)
QIP	Quick Impact Project
QRF	Quick Reaction Force
ROE	Rules of Engagement
RPG	<i>Ruchnoy Protivotankoviy Granatomet</i> (Rocket Propelled Grenade)
RTI	Research Triangle Institute
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SFIR	Stabilisation Force Iraq
SFOR	Stabilisation Force
SITREP	Situation report
SSR	Security Sector Reform
TIF	Theatre Internment Facility
TSU	Tactical Support Unit
UAV	Unmanned Aerial Vehicle
UN	United Nations
UNMOVIC	United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission
UNSCOM	United Nations Special Commission
US	United States
USAID	us Agency for International Development
VBIED	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device
VCP	vehicle checkpoint
VVD	<i>Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie</i> (political party)

Notes

Introduction

¹ House of Representatives of the States-General, parliamentary year 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, letter from the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence, 6 June 2003. See also: House of Representatives of the States-General 2005-2006, 29521, no. 17, letter from Ministers of Defence and Foreign Affairs, 22 September 2005, annex 6185: 'Eindevaluatie van de Nederlandse deelname aan de Stabilisation Force in Iraq 2003-2005' (henceforth: SFIR End Evaluation).

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³ Greg Muttitt, *Fuel on the fire. Oil and politics in occupied Iraq* (London 2012) 3-5.

⁴ Jan Schoeman, 'Meer plicht dan passie. Nederland over zijn krijgsmacht en veteranen', *Militaire Spectator* 177-6 (2008) 320-330, specifically 324. See also: *de Volkskrant* 2 October 2004.

⁵ Norimitsu Onoshi, 'Dutch soldiers find smiles protect as well as armor', *The New York Times* 24 October 2004. This article was also printed in the *International Herald Tribune* of 24 October 2004 and quoted in *NRC Handelsblad* 25 October 2004.

⁶ 'Nederlandse militairen vierten kerst in Irak', *NOVA/Den Haag Vandaag* 27 December 2003.

⁷ SFIR End Evaluation.

Chapter 1 Towards Iraq

¹ Proceedings of the House of Representatives of the States-General 2005-2006, 29521, no. 20, minutes of a general meeting on 5 October 2005 (adopted on 23 November 2005) 9.

² *de Volkskrant* 6 October 2005.

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⁴ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2005-2006, 29521, no. 9 (17 October 2005) 487-505.

⁵ Rick Atkinson, *Crusade. The untold story of the Persian Gulf war* (New York and Boston 1993) 53.

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⁷ Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam. The politics of intervention in Iraq* (London and New York 1999) 20.

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- ⁸ See *Frontline* television documentary 'Spying on Saddam. Investigating the UN's dramatic, thwarted effort to uncover Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons', Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) 27 April 1999; See also www.un.org/Depts/unscom/Chronology/chronologyframe.htm.
- ⁹ Christ Klep and Richard van Gils, *Van Korea tot Kabul. De Nederlandse militaire deelname aan vredesoperaties sinds 1945* (The Hague 2005) 270.
- ¹⁰ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 83-86.
- ¹¹ Tim Trevan, *Saddam's secrets: the hunt for Iraq's hidden weapons* (London 1999) 365-366; *Frontline*, 'Spying on Saddam', chronology.
- ¹² Robert Fisk, *The great war for civilization. The conquest of the Middle East* (London 2005) 891-895.
- ¹³ Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam*, 87.
- ¹⁴ *Frontline*, 'Gunning for Saddam. Should Saddam Hussein be America's next target in the war on terrorism?', PBS 8 November 2001. See also Bob Woodward, *Plan of attack* (New York etc. 2004) 70.
- ¹⁵ Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II. The inside story of the invasion and occupation of Iraq* (New York 2006) 12.
- ¹⁶ *Frontline*, 'The dark side', PBS 20 June 2006; Eric Herring and Glen Rangwala, *Iraq in fragments. The occupation and its legacy* (London 2006) 7-13.
- ¹⁷ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 49.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54. See also Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco. The American military adventure in Iraq* (New York 2006) 39.
- ¹⁹ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 65.
- ²⁰ 'The dark side', PBS 20 June 2006.
- ²¹ Consult the text on www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html.
- ²² *de Volkskrant* 14 February 2002.
- ²³ Woodward, *Plan of attack*, 119-120.
- ²⁴ BBC, 15 August 2002. See: new.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2193426.htm.
- ²⁵ Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, *America unbound. The Bush revolution in foreign policy* (2nd revised and updated edition, New York 2005) 135.
- ²⁶ Woodward, *Plan of attack*, 164.
- ²⁷ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 52-55. See also Woodward, *Plan of attack*, 195-196.
- ²⁸ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 46-57.
- ²⁹ Evidence for this came to light in the spring of 2005 when the British press reported on what became known as the 'Downing Street Memos', leaked government documents in which senior British officials had stated back in the summer of 2002 that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" and that the US intended to justify a war by claiming links between Iraq, terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. See the original documents on: www.downingstreetmemo.com.
- ³⁰ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 69.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ³² *NRC Handelsblad* 9 November 2002. The resolution can be found on the UN website.
- ³³ Daalder and Lindsay, *America unbound*, 139.
- ³⁴ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 105. Original documents backing the research have been published by The National Security Archive (www.nsarchive.org).
- ³⁵ Daalder and Lindsay, *America unbound*, 140; see also 'Blix: Irak is te weinig coöperatief', *de Volkskrant* 28 January 2003.

- ³⁶ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 145.
- ³⁷ Bob Woodward, *State of denial. Bush at war, part III* (New York etc. 2006) 112-113.
- ³⁸ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 160.
- ³⁹ President George W. Bush, Address to the Nation 19 March 2003. See: www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/bushpresidency.html.
- ⁴⁰ Williamson Murray and Robert H. Scales, *The Iraq war. A military history* (Cambridge and London 2003).
- ⁴¹ Klep and Van Gils, *Van Korea tot Kabul*, 466-467.
- ⁴² Idem.
- ⁴³ Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, 457-459.
- ⁴⁴ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2001-2002, 95-5648 to 95-5671 (5 September 2002), specifically 95-5664.
- ⁴⁵ Idem, 5665-5666. See also: Davids Report, 85.
- ⁴⁶ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 66, specifically 5.
- ⁴⁷ Minister of Defence in the Balkenende I government, A.H. Korthals (vvd) resigned in December 2002 as a result of the conclusions drawn by a parliamentary inquiry, which established that Korthals – in his capacity as Minister of Justice in the Kok II government (1998-2002) – had incorrectly informed Parliament in 2001 on a settlement in the construction fraud case relating to the train tunnel under Schiphol Airport. Minister of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment H.G.J. Kamp therefore took over at Defence on 12 December 2002. Kamp subsequently held the post of Minister of Defence in the Balkenende II (2003-2006) and Balkenende III (2006-2007) cabinets.
- ⁴⁸ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2002-2003, 46-3085 to 46-3120 (19 February 2003), specifically 3112-3113.
- ⁴⁹ Davids Report, 92-96 and 355-360, and annex L for the original text.
- ⁵⁰ Davids Report, annex L.
- ⁵¹ *Defensiekrant* 20 February 2003 and Semi-active Records Office of the Ministry of Defence (ssa Defensie), Records of the Defence Crisis Management Centre (dcrc), 2002-2003, boxes 1 and 2.
- ⁵² Erwin Kamp et al eds., *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1. Het eerste Nederlandse detachement in de bakermat van de westerse beschaving* (Wormerveer 2004) 17; Davids Report, 362-363.
- ⁵³ Davids Report, 364-365.
- ⁵⁴ Idem, 132-133.
- ⁵⁵ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 76, letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 10 February 2003.
- ⁵⁶ Davids Report, 194. For the selective use of intelligence analyses, see chapter 7.4 and 9.
- ⁵⁷ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2002-2003, 46-3085 to 46-3120 (19 February 2003), specifically 3113 and 3115.
- ⁵⁸ Davids Report, 373.
- ⁵⁹ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 92, letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 11 March 2003. Here, too, the Davids Committee concluded that the Dutch government had interpreted the UN inspectors' reports selectively – as they had with intelligence material – and had stripped them of nuances. See conclusion 25 (page 427) and chapter 7.
- ⁶⁰ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 94, letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 18 March 2003.
- ⁶¹ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2002-2003, 50-3275 to 50-3327 (18 March 2003) specifically 3282-3284.
- ⁶² Davids Report, chapter 6.

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⁶³ Documents containing proof of this were obtained by *NRC Handelsblad*. See: Joost Oranje, 'Hollandse oorlogslogica', *NRC Handelsblad* 12 June 2004 and 'Memorandum DJZ/IR/2003/158', *NRC Handelsblad* 17 January 2009.

⁶⁴ *NRC Handelsblad* 12 June 2004, as well as Davids Report, 254-255.

⁶⁵ Davids Report, chapter 8.

⁶⁶ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2002-2003, 50-3275 to 50-3327 (18 March 2003) specifically 3298. The Davids Report made short shrift of this government reasoning in 2010.

⁶⁷ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2002-2003, 50-3275 to 50-3327 (18 March 2003) specifically 3326.

⁶⁸ House of Representatives of the States-General 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 94.

⁶⁹ A.G. van Ede, 'Planning en aansturing van SFIR (en andere operaties)', *Qua Patet Orbis* 3 (2003) 7-12, specifically 8-9.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Planning order o80 (Stabilisation Force Iraq) from CDS dated 11 April 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Records of the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), S2003002188.

⁷² *de Volkskrant* 11 April 2003.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23 432, no. 105, letter from Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence dated 11 April 2003.

⁷⁵ D.A. Swijgman, 'Verslag verkenning Irak', 15 May 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contingent Command Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM 1: oc\oc\ndetirak\Vastlegger\SF IRAK\5 planning\ontplooiing\Verslag verkenning Irak1.doc.

⁷⁶ Swijgman, 'Verslag verkenning Irak'.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Minutes of 5th Planning Team meeting 1 (NL) Det Iraq dated 2 May 2003, in: Semi-active Records Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SSA BUZA), Security Policy Department Records (DVB), file 815603 (May 2003).

⁷⁹ Minutes of 7th Planning Team meeting 1 (NL) Det Iraq dated 15 May 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 815603 (May 2003); Interview with Colonel (Rtd.) T.G.J. Damen (11 March 2010).

⁸⁰ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 17.

⁸¹ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, letter from Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence dated 6 June 2003, 1.

⁸² See the resolution on www.un.org: S/RES/1483 (2003).

⁸³ House of Representatives of the States-General 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, 2. For an opposing opinion, see Dick Leurdijk, 'VN-mandaat stabiliteitsmacht Irak onduidelijk', *Atlantisch Perspectief* 5 (2003) 4-5.

⁸⁴ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, 9.

⁸⁵ Idem, 2.

⁸⁶ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 27.

⁸⁷ Idem, 8.

⁸⁸ Idem, 10.

⁸⁹ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 121, 3-8.

⁹⁰ Idem, 8-12.

Chapter 2

'A sandpit under Dutch control'

¹ Sitrep by political adviser, 30 July 2003; Sitrep by political adviser, 14 October 2003; Sitrep by Contco 005/2003, 31 July 2003, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR 5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Rapportages\Situatierapporten Contco. The Contco Sitreps, which contain all daily Sitreps by the battle group as annexes, can be found at this location unless otherwise specified. Some of the reports by the Dutch political adviser for the SFIR 1 period can be found in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 t/m SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Rapportages\NLBG\Polad. The remaining political adviser reports for the SFIR 1 and SFIR 2 periods can be found in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.

² Sitrep by political adviser, 1 August 2003; Interview with Colonel (MC) D.A. Swijgman (16 May and 24 June 2008).

³ Sitrep by political adviser, 1 August 2003.

⁴ Monte Reel, 'The Bridge at Samawah: It was a small thing, the taking of this obscure Iraqi city. Unless you were there', *The Washington Post* 4 April 2003; Rick Atkinson, *In the company of soldiers: a chronicle of combat in Iraq* (New York 2004) 199 and 215.

⁵ 'Verkenningmissie naar Zuid-Irak i.v.m. mogelijke uitzending Nederlands bataljon mariniers (24-28 mei 2003)', in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 02857 (May 2003).

⁶ Swijgman, 'Verslag verkenning Irak'.

⁷ Sitrep by Contco 019/2003, 14 August 2003.

⁸ 'Bericht uit Irak', *De Lekstreek* 20 August 2003.

⁹ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 189-191.

¹⁰ D. Swijgman, 'Het 1e Nederlandse detachement Irak: Iets nieuws onder de zon?', *Marineblad* 113-12 (December 2003) 389.

¹¹ Report by 12 Infantry Company, 'Camp Smitty As Samawah' (1 August 2003) on the website of 1 NLDETIRAK, to be found on the CD-ROM in *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1* (henceforth: Website 1 NLDETIRAK).

¹² Interview with Swijgman.

¹³ *de Volkskrant* 18 July 2003.

¹⁴ *NRC Handelsblad* 28 July 2003.

¹⁵ C. Schellens, 'Van de compagniescommandant 11 Coy Gp, As Samawah, Irak', Website 1 NLDETIRAK.

¹⁶ Sitrep by Contco 008/2003, 3 August 2003.

¹⁷ OpO 001/03 1 NL DET IRAQ (Establishment Al Muthanna), 18 June 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 2, S-3\Irak\OPORD\OPORD 001. See also: *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 20.

¹⁸ Baghdad Embassy, "NL Bat in AM/CPA", 7 August 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 03125 (August 2003).

¹⁹ Joost Margés, 'Mensen met een missie: ongemakken laten militairen in heet Irak veelal koud', *Alle Hens* (October 2003) 14.

²⁰ Sitrep by 1 NL DET IRAQ 024/2003, 5 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, BOX 17; Interview with Swijgman.

²¹ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 77.

²² Idem, 71.

²³ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 20.

²⁴ Sitrep by Contco 009/2003, 4 August 2003; Sitrep by Contco 010/2003, 5 August 2003; Maj. J. Schooneman 14 August 2003, article for Website 1 NLDETIRAK.

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- ²⁵ Interview with Swijgman; 1 NLDETIRAK Briefing to Permanent Parliamentary Committees for Foreign Affairs and Defence, 29 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, CONTCO STABILISATION FORCE IRAQ 2 RECORDS, BOX NO. 45, HARD DRIVE, F:\BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K.\SFIR3\Geeratz
- ²⁶ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 126.
- ²⁷ Sitrep by Contco 008/2003, 8 August 2003; Sitrep by Contco 009/2003, 9 August 2003; Sitrep by Contco 017/2003, 12 August 2003, Annex B: *Schietincidenten bij cementfabriek*.
- ²⁸ Daily Sitrep 12th infcoy, 010, 13 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, CONTCO Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 9, Al Khidr\Vastlegger\cc 12 Coy\Daily Sitreps Irak\A. Aug. 2003.
- ²⁹ Daily Sitrep 12th infcoy, 018, 21 August 2003.
- ³⁰ Daily Sitrep 12th infcoy, 019, 22 August 2003 and 021, 24 August 2003.
- ³¹ Major Kees Schellens, 11 Infantry Company for Website 1 NLDETIRAK.
- ³² Major Jos Schooneman, article for Website 1 NLDETIRAK; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 103-105, 118 and 123-124.
- ³³ J.L.H. Husken, 11 Infantry Company: 'ervaringen van een korporaal in As Samawah', *Qua Patet Orbis* (December 2003) 28.
- ³⁴ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 164; Article no. 4 by 13 Infantry Company for local newspaper, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM 5\cc13\Info ops.
- ³⁵ Memo Advies personeelssterkte MP peloton, 11 November 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM Kmar SFIR 1, vastlegging gegevens\dennis\Personeel.
- ³⁶ Sitreps by Contco 017/2003, 12 August 2003 and 010/2003, 5 August 2003.
- ³⁷ 'Verkenningssmissie naar Zuid-Irak i.v.m. mogelijke uitzending Nederlands bataljon mariniers (24-28 mei 2003)', in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 02857 (May 2003).
- ³⁸ CPA order no. 7 dated 23 June 2003; 1 NLDETIRAK Frago 005/2003, 6 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 t/m SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Operaties\Algemeen\Wapens\030806. NLBG.frago 005 inbeslagname vuurwapens.doc.
- ³⁹ House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, 10.
- ⁴⁰ Sitrep by Contco 019/2003, 14 August 2003.
- ⁴¹ Legal adviser 1 (NL) Det Iraq to 1 (NL) Det Iraq / s3, 14 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, CONTCO STABILISATION FORCE IRAQ 2 RECORDS, BOX NO. 45, HARD DRIVE, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K.\SFIR 3\Geeratz\Brieven\schapensmokkel.doc.
- ⁴² Synnott, 'State-building in Southern Iraq', *Survival*, 47-2 (summer 2005) 37-38, 54. See also: Thomas Ricks, *Fiasco: the american military adventure in Iraq* (London etc. 2006) and Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial life in the emerald city: inside Iraq's Green Zone* (New York 2006). For the lack of attention devoted to provincial CPA administration, in addition to the reports by the Dutch political adviser, see also the book by Rory Stewart, *The Prince of the Marshes*.
- ⁴³ Ricks, *Fiasco*, chapter 10.
- ⁴⁴ For a brief analysis of allied military command between 1942 and 1949 see: Brocades Zaalberg, *Soldiers and civil power*, chapter 1. For the poor US-UK planning for post-war Iraq see: Ricks, *Fiasco*; George Packer, *Assassins' gate: America in Iraq* (New York 2005); David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: inside the postwar reconstruction fiasco* (s.l. 2005); Chandrasekaran, *Imperial life in the emerald city*; Hilary Synnott, *Bad days in Basra: my turbulent time as Britain's man in Southern Iraq* (London and New York 2008).
- ⁴⁵ Sitreps by political adviser, 28 July and 30 July 2003.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Swijgman; Interview with M. Rentenaar (7 June 2008); Correspondence between authors and Rentenaar, 21 February 2008; Sitrep by political adviser, 4 August 2003.
- ⁴⁷ 'First impression report / Rapport resultaten verkenningsteam Irak', version 10 June 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 03060 (June 2003); DVB E-mail to Dutch Embassy in London, 29

- May 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 02857 (May 2003); Rentenaar, 'Verkenningssmissie naar Zuid-Irak i.v.m. mogelijke uitzending Nederlands bataljon mariniers (24-18 May 2003)', in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records inv. no. 02857 (May 2003).
- ⁴⁸ For this concern see: DVB E-mail to Dutch Embassy in London, 29 May 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 02857 (May 2003).
- ⁴⁹ Director of Legal Affairs to the Minister of Defence, 'Juridische kaders post-conflict Irak', 23 April 2003, in: SSA Defensie, DJZ Records, file C2003/206.
- ⁵⁰ Brocades Zaalberg, *Soldiers and civil power*, chapters 10 and 11.
- ⁵¹ 'Juridische kaders post-conflict Irak', 23 April 2003.
- ⁵² Resolution 1483, available on www.un.org, S/RES/1483 (2003). See also: House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 121.
- ⁵³ Remarkably lawyers from both the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs emphatically questioned the distinction between occupying powers and non-occupying powers, as made in Resolution 1483, in academic articles in 2004. See Liesbeth Lijnzaad, 'How not to be an occupying power: some reflections on UN Security Council resolution 1483 and the contemporary law of occupation' in: Liesbeth Lijnzaad, Johanna van Sambeek and Bahia Tahzib-Lie eds., *Making the voice of humanity heard* (Leiden 2004) 297. See also: Marten Zwanenburg, 'Existentialism in Iraq: Security Council Resolution 1483 and the Law of Occupation', *International Review of the Red Cross* 86-856 (December 2004) 745-769.
- ⁵⁴ The New Zealand government, which sent 55 military engineers to Iraq, was the only other country to stress its status of non-occupying power in a way similar to that of the Netherlands. Zwanenburg, 'Existentialism in Iraq', 756 and 765.
- ⁵⁵ See, among others: the use of the abbreviation SFIR in SFIR End Evaluation.
- ⁵⁶ Initially it was in fact the Danish ambassador Ole Wohlers Olsen who headed the CPA in the southern region. According to his successor, Sir Hilary Synnott, the appointment of the Danish diplomat was "a political symbol of wider support for reconstruction and stabilisation and as a dilution of the apparent US domination of the enterprise". See Synnott, 'State-building in Southern Iraq', *Survival* 47-2 (Summer 2005) 37.
- ⁵⁷ House of Representatives 2003-2004, 29521, no. 4, letter from the Minister of Defence dated 19 May 2004, annex 1, 'Periodieke evaluatie van de Nederlandse deelneming aan de Stabilisation Force Iraq', 2003-2004 (henceforth: SFIR Periodic Evaluation).
- ⁵⁸ Annex D to minutes by 19th Planning Team meeting 1 (NL) DETIRAK, 17 July 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Record Office of the Naval Staff Operations Division, file 67.
- ⁵⁹ DVB to DGPZ, 'Brits verzoek: militaire bijdrage en civiele liaison', 19 June 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 03060 (June 2003); DJZ/LJB to DJZ, 'Governorate Teams', 8 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, DJZ Records, file 2003/206.
- ⁶⁰ Hilary Synnott, *Bad days in Basra*, 129.
- ⁶¹ For references to MOU between Dutch and UK governments see: Van den Berg Committee, 29-30; SFIR End Evaluation, 9.
- ⁶² House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116, letter from the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence dated 6 June 2003.
- ⁶³ Sitrep by Contco 018/2003, 13 August 2003.
- ⁶⁴ Steven Derix, 'Push-ups! Opdrukken! Ten Times! Nederlandse militairen leiden in Zuid-Irak soldaten en agenten op', *NRC Handelsblad* 27 September 2003; See also Hans Jaap Melissen, 'Het broeit in Al Muthanna', *Wereldomroep* 18 October 2003.
- ⁶⁵ SFIR Periodic Evaluation, 22.
- ⁶⁶ Sitrep by Contco 039/2003, 3 September 2003 and Sitrep by Contco 040/3004, 4 September 2003.
- ⁶⁷ Sitrep by Contco 039/2003 and Sitrep by Contco 042/2003, 6 September 2003.

- ⁶⁸ David Hencke and Andy Rowell, 'The battle the mod lost: papers reveal failed bid to sway opinion in Iraq', *The Guardian* 19 November 2003.
- ⁶⁹ Operational journal of C-Contco (29 September 2003), in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, CONTCO SHAIBA\OFF VASTLEGGER KASTELIC BC, I.M\ Vastlegger 15 mrt\C-CONTCO (Henceforth: Operational journal C-Contco).
- ⁷⁰ Operational journal of C-Contco, 3 October 2003.
- ⁷¹ DJZ to Kolmars. A.G. van Ede (etc.), 'Operatie Sweeney SFIR', 20 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Record Office of the Naval Staff Operations Division, file no. 62.
- ⁷² Sitrep by Contco 075/2003, 9 October 2003.
- ⁷³ Sitrep by Contco 079/2003, 13 October 2003 and Sitrep by Contco 077/2003, 11 October 2003.
- ⁷⁴ Major Mark van den Berg on Website 1 NLDETIRAK.
- ⁷⁵ Commander report 12 October 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁷⁶ MAJMARN F. Swart, '1-NLDETIRAK: Is er iets nieuws onder de zon?', *Qua Patet Orbis* (December 2003) 18; Sitrep 046/2003, 10 September 2003.
- ⁷⁷ Op Pocket Search, s2 Briefing, 9 September 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 2\IS-3 Irak\FragO\FRAGO 020 OP POCKET SEARCH.
- ⁷⁸ Op Pocket Search, s2 Briefing, 9 September 2003.
- ⁷⁹ Sitrep by Contco 046/2003, 10 September 2003; Interview with Rentenaar.
- ⁸⁰ Interview with Swijgman.
- ⁸¹ See abovementioned MOU.
- ⁸² Major M. Geeratz, 'Hand-over file', 15 November 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K\ SFIR3\Geeratz; 1 NL DET IRAK Briefing to Permanent Parliamentary Committees for Foreign Affairs and Defence, 29 October 2003, in: Ibid.
- ⁸³ Preventive operations against Former Regime Loyalists never resulted in the use of firearms. *Evaluatie SFIR 1 conform aanwijzing CDS nr. A-5, 7.*
- ⁸⁴ From November 2006, two official committees investigated the alleged poor treatment of detainees by Dutch military personnel in Iraq. They published their findings simultaneously in June 2007. See: *Onderzoek ondervragingen in Irak: rapport van de commissie van onderzoek naar de betrokkenheid van Nederlandse militairen bij mogelijke misstanden bij gesprekken met gedetineerden in Irak* (The Hague 18 June 2007) – hereafter Van den Berg Committee – and CTIVD no. 15 *Inzake het onderzoek naar het optreden van MIVD-medewerkers in Irak bij het ondervragen van gedetineerden* (The Hague 18 June 2007).
- ⁸⁵ Van den Berg Committee, 4, 18, 30-31 and 47. The Van den Berg Committee's report wrongly states on page 30 that Dutch troops were in principle not authorised to "apprehend" civilians in the occupied area, only to state correctly elsewhere two relevant and sizeable exceptions, i.e. "those suspected of crimes, labelled as detainees" and "persons who pose a threat to [the troops'] security, labelled as internees". The authors of this book use the term 'arrest', as in practice NLBG was authorised to arrest suspects and in Dutch the term 'to detain' is usually associated with 'taking someone into custody' or 'incarceration'.
- ⁸⁶ See, among others: the interview met Major (Rtd.) Misha Geeratz in: Jan Hoedeman, 'Defensie doet veel te spastisch', *de Volkskrant* 1 June 2006.
- ⁸⁷ See for the MOU in this respect: Van den Berg Committee, 29-30: CTIVD no. 15, 9-10. ROE 182 dealt with the authorisation to detain suspects.
- ⁸⁸ Frago no. 004/03, NLDET IRAQ Detainment procedures, 27 July 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1. Simply by making the presence of his own legal adviser mandatory, the Dutch commander deviated from the British division order. See: Van den Berg Committee, 32.
- ⁸⁹ Major M. Geeratz to C-1(NL) Det Irak, 'Detainee', 1 September 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST

PRINSEN, MR F.K\SFIR 3\Geeratz\Brieven\Detenee.doc. Incidentally, in his memo Geeratz used the term 'arrest' for what formally should have been 'detention' according to Dutch legislation.

⁹⁰ As the Netherlands was not permitted to 'intern' people, from the moment of their apprehension to their handover to the British the battle group also described civilians who posed a threat to the Coalition (i.e. internees) as detainees.

⁹¹ House of Commons Defence Committee, 'Iraq: an initial assessment of post-conflict operations', Sixth Report of Session 2004-05, volume 1 (henceforth: House of Commons, 'Iraq') 39.

⁹² Van den Berg Committee, 84.

⁹³ Document 'Overdragen gedetineerden', 20 October 2003; Fax to DCBC, 'Overgedragen gedetineerden', 15 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 t/m SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Juridische zaken\Arrestatie en insluiting; Contco to DCBC, 'Verslag Legal conference', 4 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records (2003), box 17.

⁹⁴ Legal adviser to C-1(NL) Det Irak, 'Detainee', 1 September 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K\SFIR 3\Geeratz\Brieven\Detenee.doc.

⁹⁵ E-mail 'RE: HVT in NL BG AO', 2 September 2003. See also the preceding E-mail correspondence in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR MND-SE legal files\NL issues\RE HVT in NL BG AO2.htm.

⁹⁶ *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the Treatment by the Coalition Forces of Prisoners of War and Other Protected Persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq During Arrest, Internment and Interrogation* (February 2004). ICRC reports of this kind are confidential, but this one was leaked to the press and can be found in various locations on the internet.

⁹⁷ MND SE Standard Operation Instruction (SOI) 390, 30 September 2003. See: Van den Berg Committee, 30; CTIVD no. 15, 35.

⁹⁸ For the treatment of detainees by US and British Coalition troops see the public report: UK Army, *The Aitken report: An investigation into cases of deliberate abuse and unlawful killing in Iraq in 2003 and 2004* (25 January 2008); See also: Van den Berg Committee, 30; *Report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the treatment by the Coalition Forces of prisoners of war and other protected persons by the Geneva Conventions in Iraq during arrest, internment and interrogation*; Sir William Gage (chairman), *The Baha Mousa public inquiry report* (Presented to Parliament pursuant to Section 26 of the Inquiries Act 2005; Printed by The Stationery Office, 8 September 2011).

⁹⁹ Van den Berg Committee, 30-31.

¹⁰⁰ *Idem*, 4, 18 and 70; CTIVD no. 15, 15-16.

¹⁰¹ Both the Van den Berg Committee and the CTIVD concluded in their reports that in most cases the "interviews" had all the hallmarks of questioning or an interrogation.

¹⁰² Van den Berg Committee, 32-33; CTIVD no. 15, 21.

¹⁰³ Van den Berg Committee, 4-5, 46 and 56. See also: CTIVD no. 15, 19 and 21.

¹⁰⁴ Van den Berg Committee, 35, 45 and 84.

¹⁰⁵ *Idem*, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Idem*, 36.

¹⁰⁷ *Idem*, 5, 56-57; CTIVD no. 15, 24.

¹⁰⁸ Van den Berg Committee, 36. See also: CTIVD no. 15, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Van den Berg Committee, 36.

¹¹⁰ *Idem*, 37; See also: 'Geen aangifte, onder couvert houden', *de Volkskrant* 18 June 2006.

¹¹¹ Van den Berg Committee, 46.

- ¹¹² Major [name blacked out] to Public Prosecution Service in Arnhem, 'Appreciatie onderzoek Irak', 17 February 2004, published on: www.volkskrant.nl/multimedia/archive/00079/marchauseegheel_79060.jpg. See also: CTIVD no. 15, 17-18; Van den Berg Committee, 6.
- ¹¹³ E-mail from Contco to DJZ, 'Antwoord Zwanenburg', 29 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Iraq 1 Records, 2003, box 16.
- ¹¹⁴ Sitrep by Contco 044/2003, 8 September 2003, Annex B, Contco monthly report.
- ¹¹⁵ E-mail 'RE: antwoord Zwanenburg', 1 September 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Iraq 1 Records, 2003, box 16.
- ¹¹⁶ CDS directive no. 100 (Stabilisation Force Iraq), 30 June 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Record Office of the Naval Staff Operations Division, file 68; Van den Berg Committee report, 59.
- ¹¹⁷ Van den Berg Committee, 59.
- ¹¹⁸ DJZ/LJB to DCBC via HJJB, 'Operatie Sweeney SFIR', 20 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Record Office of the Naval Staff Operations Division, file 62. See: DJZ/LJB to DCBC, 'SFIR en criminaliteitsbestrijding', 21 July 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Juridische zaken\Criminaliteitsbestrijding\Memo mandaat SFIR criminaliteitsbestrijding.doc.
- ¹¹⁹ The analysis of Operation Greenfield by the NIMH authors deviates on one point from the analysis in the Van den Berg Committee Report. In the archives, no direct proof was found that the action "was primarily aimed at force protection", an assertion which was put forward by the Committee to justify the conclusion that the operation came within the mandate. Colonel Swijgman stressed during an interview for this publication that – although the arms being traded in As Samawah could of course have been used against the Dutch – the main motive for the operation was to protect the population against criminal violence.
- ¹²⁰ Interview with Swijgman.
- ¹²¹ Van den Berg Committee, 61.
- ¹²² Sitrep by Contco 087/2003, 21 October 2003.
- ¹²³ Ibid.
- ¹²⁴ Jan Hoedeman and Theo Koelé, 'Het zwijgpatroon', *de Volkskrant* 21 May 2003.
- ¹²⁵ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 4 August 2003.
- ¹²⁶ Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, 21-25.
- ¹²⁷ CSIS, 'Iraq's Post-Conflict Reconstruction: a field review and recommendations', 7 July 2003.
- ¹²⁸ Sitrep by political adviser, 21 August 2003.
- ¹²⁹ Bulmer, 'Our men in Al Muthanna' (published in *The Craftsman*, the British Army Engineer's magazine); Sitrep by political adviser, 21 August 2003.
- ¹³⁰ Sitrep by political adviser, 21 August 2003.
- ¹³¹ Contribution from CIMIC section 15 August 2003, Website 1 NLDETIRAK.
- ¹³² Sitrep by political adviser, 21 August 2003; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 20 and 161.
- ¹³³ DJZ/LJB to DJZ, 'Governorate Teams', 8 August 2003, SSA Defensie, DJZ Records, file 2003/206.
- ¹³⁴ Nommensen in *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 160-161; Civil-Military Policy Framework, House of Representatives of the States-General 28600 X, no. 45, 19 May 2003.
- ¹³⁵ C 1 NLDETIRAK to DCBC, Evaluation by DART team, Annex to Sitrep by Contco 046, 11 September 2003.
- ¹³⁶ Sitrep by political adviser, 21 August 2003.
- ¹³⁷ Sitrep by Contco 053/2003, 5 September 2003.
- ¹³⁸ Interview with Swijgman.
- ¹³⁹ Sitrep by Contco 065/2003, 15 September 2003.
- ¹⁴⁰ Interview with Swijgman.

¹⁴¹ Swijgman in *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 22.

¹⁴² See representation of the MND SE Masterplan and the four lines of operation in *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 18.

¹⁴³ Sitrep by political adviser, 3 January 2004.

¹⁴⁴ *Evaluatie SFIR 1 conform aanwijzing CDS nr. A-5*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ The British division initially asked for a Dutch political adviser (“to supply a polad”), but following some reticence by the Dutch the formal request was changed “to supply polad support”, to which the Netherlands agreed. Correspondence between the authors and Rentenaar, 8 February 2008.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Colonel (Rtd.) M. Bulmer (by phone, 11 February 2008).

¹⁴⁷ Interviews with Swijgman and Rentenaar.

Chapter 3

Governing in the midst of chaos

¹ Sitrep by Contco 08/2003, 3 August 2003; Sitrep 12 infcoy, 3 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 9, Al Khidr\Vastlegger\cc 12 Coy\Daily Sitreps Irak\A. Aug. 2003\Daily Sitrep Contco 001, 3 aug 2003.doc

² ‘Operations: General observations’ (undated reconnaissance report), in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 2, S-3\Irak\OPORD\RECCE Fact finding\Operations.doc; For “an unsavoury and unreliable individual”, see: *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 33.

³ See among others: RTI International / Iraq Local Government Program, ‘Military-civilian cooperations in postwar Iraq: experience with local governance reconstruction’, *Lessons Learned Brief 7*, May 2005.

⁴ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 30 July 2003.

⁵ E-mail from Rentenaar to RTI/LGP, 3 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.

⁶ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 28 July 2003.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Bulmer, and Bulmer, ‘Our Men in Al Muthanna’.

⁹ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 14 August 2003.

¹⁰ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 17 August 2003; Sitrep by Contco 054/2004, 23 February 2004.

¹¹ United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Special Report no. 139, *The Coalition Provisional Authority’s Experience with Governance in Iraq, Lesson Identified* (May 2005); ICG Middle East Report No. 33, *Iraq: can local governance save central government?* 27 October 2004.

¹² ICG, *Iraq: can local government save central government?*; Sitrep by Contco 024/2003, 5 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records (2003), box 17; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 8 August 2003. This document contains the first use of the expression ‘Al Muthanna model’.

¹³ E-mail ‘Al Muthanna visit to Baghdad’, 4 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records (2003), box 17.

¹⁴ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 4 and 8 August 2003; interview with Bulmer.

¹⁵ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 11 September 2003; for the CPA’s half-hearted stance on decentralisation, see: Sitrep by Contco 014/2003, 9 August 2003.

¹⁶ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 15 September 2003.

¹⁷ Sitrep by Contco 045/2003, 9 September 2003; see also Sitrep by political adviser 1, 15 September 2003.

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- ¹⁸ Sitrep by Contco 045/2003, 9 September 2003.
- ¹⁹ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 11 September 2003; Nicholas Blanford, 'Al-Muthanna elections an emerging success story and model for Iraq: US civilian overseer orders other 17 provinces to follow example', *The Daily Star – Lebanese News* 19 December 2003.
- ²⁰ Sitrep by Contco 053/2003, 17 September 2003; Sitrep by Contco 054/2003, 18 September 2003.
- ²¹ Bulmer, Rentenaar and Blunt also accused Andrews of a complete lack of cultural sensitivity and bluntness in his dealings with Sami. Sitrep by Contco 52/2003, 15 September 2003; Correspondence between authors and Rentenaar, 8 February 2008; E-mail from Blunt, 24 September 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1; Interview with Bulmer.
- ²² Minutes of Ar Rumaythah city council meetings, 13 August 2003 up to and including 10 November 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 5, CC13\City Council Ar Rumaythah; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 3 November 2003.
- ²³ E-mail correspondence between 18 September and 25 September 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 03125 (August 2003).
- ²⁴ Sitrep by Contco 075/2003. 9 October 2003.
- ²⁵ Nicholas Blanford, 'Al-Muthanna elections'.
- ²⁶ E-mail from Rentenaar to RTI/LGP, 3 January 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ²⁷ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 14 October 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Brief 'cv' of new governor of Al Muthanna, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 11, INTEL REP INFO\16-10\Intel Rep Information 16-10\Political\cv Gouverneur.doc.
- ³⁰ Correspondence with Rentenaar, 8 February 2008.
- ³¹ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 20 October 2003.
- ³² Major General Graeme Lamb, 'Appraisal for Marcel de Vink', 19 December 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 04045 (October 2003 - January 2004).
- ³³ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 20 October 2003; For "strong man", see: Sitrep by political adviser 2, 20 October 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ³⁴ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 17.
- ³⁵ Steven Derix, 'Push-ups! Opdrukken! Ten Times! Nederlandse militairen leiden in Zuid-Irak soldaten en agenten op', *NRC Handelsblad*, 27 September 2003; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 229.
- ³⁶ E-mail from political adviser 1, 30 October 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 03125 (August 2003).
- ³⁷ Frans Timmermans, 'Verslag uit Irak', 29 October 2003 (on www.franstimmermans.pvda.nl). See also: Sitrep by Contco 96/2003, 30 October 2003.
- ³⁸ Interview with Swijman; Van den Berg Committee, 42 and 63.
- ³⁹ Van den Berg Committee, 42.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Colonel (MC) R.G. Oppelaar, 26 November 2008.
- ⁴¹ House of Representatives 2003-2004, KVR 18947, 4 November 2003; 'Bataljon wil vliegen met Orion', *De Gelderlander* 10 September 2003.
- ⁴² Sitrep by Contco 95/2003, 29 October 2003 and Sitrep by Contco 96/2003, 30 October 2003.
- ⁴³ Frans Timmermans, 'Verslag uit Irak', 30 October 2003.
- ⁴⁴ Sitrep by Contco 81/2003, 1 October 2003.
- ⁴⁵ Herring and Rangwala, *Iraq in fragments*, 202-203.
- ⁴⁶ Ali A. Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq. Winning the war, losing the peace* (New Haven and London 2007) 205-206.

- ⁴⁷ See Linda Robinson, *Masters of chaos. The secret history of the special forces* (New York 2004) 260-262, as well as Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Shia insurgency in Iraq* (paperback edition; London 2009) 149-158.
- ⁴⁸ David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* (s.l. 2005) 199.
- ⁴⁹ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 20 October 2003.
- ⁵⁰ Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq*, 212-213.
- ⁵¹ Phillips, *Losing Iraq*, 199; Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The endgame. The inside story of the struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York 2012) 51.
- ⁵² George Packer, *The assassins' gate: America in Iraq* (New York and London 2005) 315.
- ⁵³ E-mail from Rentenaar to RTI/LGP, 3 January 2004; Minutes of meeting of City Council Ar Rumaythah, 6 November 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 5, CC13\City Council Ar Rumaythah.
- ⁵⁴ Sitrep by Contco 81/2003, 1 October 2003; Sitrep by Contco 90/2003, 10 October 2003.
- ⁵⁵ Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Iraq* (London 2006) 197; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 30 November 2003.
- ⁵⁶ Sitreps by Contco 045/2003 and 075/2003, 9 September 2003; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 4 November 2003.
- ⁵⁷ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 46-48, 188.
- ⁵⁸ Sitrep by Contco 121/2003, 23 November 2003.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with Bulmer. See also: Rory Stewart, *The Prince of the Marshes. And other occupational hazards of a year in Iraq* (London etc. 2006) 87 and 273-274.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with Rentenaar.
- ⁶¹ Coordinating committee of political parties and movements in the province of Al Muthanna, 'De eisen', 31 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 6, Nommensen\Verslagen.
- ⁶² Sitreps by Contco 074/2003 and 075/2003, 8 and 9 October 2003; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 4 November 2003. See also: Minutes of meeting of City Council Ar Rumaythah, 29 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 5, CC13\City Council Ar Rumaythah (6 November 2003).
- ⁶³ Sitrep by Contco 045/2003, 9 September 2003. The new governor was said to have argued in favour of merging the police force with the local Badr Brigades.
- ⁶⁴ Sitrep by Contco 107/2003, 10 November 2003; Interview with Swijgman.
- ⁶⁵ Sitrep by Contco 141/2003, 12 December 2003; Interview with Rentenaar.
- ⁶⁶ See 'cv Lcol Kareem' in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\02_SIE S2\RESTRICTED\Thema's\IP Overview\01) AS SAMAWAH\01) SURVEILLANCE DIENST\01) HQ IP AS SAMAWAH.
- ⁶⁷ Michael Knights and Ed Williams, 'The calm before the storm: the British experience in Southern Iraq', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 66 (February 2007) 16.
- ⁶⁸ Interview with Oppelaar.
- ⁶⁹ Operational journal C-Contco, 10 November 2003.
- ⁷⁰ *Stability Operations in Iraq (OP TELIC 2-5): an analysis from a land perspective* (prepared under the direction of the Chief of the General Staff, July 2006). This confidential report was leaked via the Wikileaks website. See also: Rod Norland, 'Iraq's repairman', *Newsweek* 5 July 2004.
- ⁷¹ Sitrep by political adviser, 18 November 2003.
- ⁷² Document 'Flash maatregelen verhoogde dreiging van oa', 13 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.

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- ⁷³ 'Future Ops', 18 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b. See also: Operation *Deep Purple*, 4-7 December 2003, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\051012\Operaties\Alfabetisch\Deep Purple 2MB\DEEP PURPLE.ppt.
- ⁷⁴ Illustrations and an explanation of the *modus operandi* in: Royal Netherlands Navy Audiovisual Service, video 'Stabilisation Force Iraq. Reportage uit het missiegebied. SFIR 2'.
- ⁷⁵ Karen Gelijns, 'Blik op het Zuiden', *Alle Hens*, February 2004, 14-15; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 86.
- ⁷⁶ The Defence reduction measures in letter: House of Representatives 2003-2004, 28600 x, no. 49, 30 June 2003. The major reorganisation was elaborated in what was known as the "Prinsjesdagbrief". See: House of Representatives 2003-2004, KST 29200 X, no. 4, 16 September 2003.
- ⁷⁷ Steven Derix, 'Afgedankt Orion-vliegtuig blijkt nog niet overbodig', *NRC Handelsblad* 16 September 2003; House of Representatives 2003-2004, KVR 18701, 16 October 2003.
- ⁷⁸ Steven Derix, 'Afgedankt Orion-vliegtuig blijkt nog niet overbodig'.
- ⁷⁹ Fax from Oppelaar, 27 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1; Operational journal C-Contco, 25 November 2003.
- ⁸⁰ For media reporting see, among others: 'Commando's moeten mariniers beschermen', *Trouw* 27 November 2003; Theo Koelé, 'Kamp: snel elitetroepen naar Irak. Mariniers hebben extra beveiliging nodig', *de Volkskrant* 27 November 2003, and *Algemeen Dagblad* 27 November 2003.
- ⁸¹ Fax from Oppelaar, 27 November 2003.
- ⁸² Sitrep by political adviser 2, 15 October 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 03729 (June-September 2003).
- ⁸³ Operational journal C-Contco, 25 November 2003; J3 DCBC to C-Contco, 'Documentatie AO 10 sep', 10 September 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Royal Netherlands Navy Records, Naval Staff, operation SFIR II, Irakcel, box 76.
- ⁸⁴ Operational journal C-Contco, 25 and 30 November 2003; Fax from Oppelaar, 27 November 2003.
- ⁸⁵ See, among others, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial life in the Emerald City: inside Iraq's green zone* (New York 2007) 192-195.
- ⁸⁶ PBS *Frontline*, 'The lost year in Iraq', 17 October 2006.
- ⁸⁷ Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, 183.
- ⁸⁸ Sitrep by political adviser, 30 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ⁸⁹ E-mail from L. Paul Bremer, 'Subject: Local Government Plan, Post-November 15', 27 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1; E-mail from Julie Chappell, 'Subject: Transitional Government / big Role for Councils', 15 November 2003, idem; E-mail from Howard Pittman, 'Subject: refreshment'. See also: Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, 246.
- ⁹⁰ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 17 November 2003, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, inv. no. 03729, June-September 2003.
- ⁹¹ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 12 January 2004; Nicholas Blanford, 'In Iraq's South, democracy buds: us administrator Paul Bremer wants to repeat the "Muthanna model" around the rest of the country', *Christian Science Monitor* 16 December 2003.
- ⁹² Sitrep by political adviser 1, 23 December 2003; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 12 January 2004.
- ⁹³ Blanford, 'In Iraq's South, democracy buds'; Idem, 'Al-Muthanna elections an emerging success story'. The only public Dutch source in which the term 'Al Muthanna model' is used is: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, *Towards a new Iraq: making the transition work, the role of the international community*, The Hague, 6 February 2004 (Seminar Proceedings). International public sources which refer to Al Muthanna as a model include: ICG Middle East Report 33, *Iraq: can local governance save central government?* (27 October 2004) and Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, 246 (not literally); In his memoirs about being a CPA administrator, Hilary Synnott ascribes all the honour for the October 2003 Provincial Governate elections to Jim Soriano. The US diplomat, whom he calls "Jim Saliero",

had not actually arrived in Al Muthanna at that point. Hilary Synnott, *Bad days in Basra*, 94-95.

⁹⁴ E-mail from Soriano, 'Al Muthanna caucuses', 31 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1. Incidentally, the roles of Alistair Blunt, and at a much earlier stage, Major Fellingner, were in fact downplayed in Soriano's praises. For Rentenaar's important role: interviews with Bulmer, Swijgman and Oppelaar; Sitrep by Contco 011/2004, 11 January 2004.

⁹⁵ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 12 January 2004.

⁹⁶ See: United States Institute for Peace (USIP), Special Report 139, *The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Governance in Iraq*, Lesson Identified (May 2005); ICG Middle East Report 33, *Iraq: can local governance save central government?*, 12 and 17.

⁹⁷ Etherington, *Revolt on the Tigris*, 236-237 and 261.

⁹⁸ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 23 December 2003.

Chapter 4

Creating a secure environment

¹ Sitrep by political adviser, 8 December 2003; Sitrep by Contco 136/2003, 8 December 2003.

² Frago 003/03 Op rent a car, 24 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b.

³ For the manipulation of the number of security troops, see: James Glanz and T. Christian Miller, 'Official History Spotlights Iraq Rebuilding Blunders', *New York Times* 14 December 2008; Office of the Special Inspector General for Iraq, *Hard lessons: the Iraq reconstruction experience* (February 2009).

⁴ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 246-247, 321.

⁵ Andrew Rathmell et al, *Developing Iraq's security sector: the Coalition Provisional Authority's experience* (Santa Monica 2005).

⁶ See, among others: Robert B. Oakley, Michael J. Dziedzic and E.M. Goldberg eds., *Policing the new world disorder: Peace Operations and Public Security* (Washington D.C. 1998); Robert Perito, *Where is the Lone Ranger when you need him? America's search for a postconflict stability force* (Washington DC 2004); Brocades Zaalberg, *Soldiers and Civil Power*.

⁷ Rathmell, *Developing Iraq's Security Sector*, 44-45.

⁸ Interview with Swijgman; 2/5 Marines S-2, 'Iraq Current Situation Brief Al Muthanna', 28 May 2003, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Ontplooiing\Briefing us tbv ontplooiing SFIR-1.ppt; interview with Major C.D. Klein (17 April 2009).

⁹ Legal adviser to C-1(NL)Det Irak, 'Juridisch proces Irak', in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K\SFIR 3\Geertz\Brieven\Reactie JvanBaal.doc; Sitrep Contco 010/2003, 5 August 2003.

¹⁰ 'Juridisch proces Irak'; Sitrep by Contco 010/2003.

¹¹ Sitrep by Contco 042/2003, 11 February 2003; Sitrep by Contco 067/2003, 7 March 2003; Peter Hengeveld, 'Operaties', *Qua Patet Orbis 2* (September 2004) 19; Hans Jaap Melissen, 'Het broeit in Al Muthanna', *Wereldomroep* 18 October 2003.

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¹⁴ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 148; 'Het "Al Muthanna politie-project"', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.

¹⁵ Interview with Klein.

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- ¹⁶ Chief of Police CPA Advisor to Commander of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (C-RNLM), 'Aantekening', 27 May 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ¹⁷ 'Het "Al Muthanna politie-project"', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ¹⁸ Geeratz, 'Hand-over file', 15 November 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K\SFIR3\Geeratz; Frank G. Hoffman, Changing tires on the fly: the Marines and postconflict stability ops (September 2006) 12; Interview with Bulmer.
- ¹⁹ MND SE aimed to form and train a single battalion for the New Iraqi Army (NIA). *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 45.
- ²⁰ CPA order no. 28 dated 3 September 2003 concerned the foundation of the ICDC. See: www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations; Sitrep by Contco 035/2003, 30 August 2003. See also: F. Overdiek, 'De oprichting van het Iraqi Civil Defense Corps', *Militaire Spectator* 173-10 (2004) 493-502.
- ²¹ Sitrep by Contco 035/2003, 30 August 2003.
- ²² 2NLBG op order no. 001/04 ICDC, 8 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b.
- ²³ Sitrep by Contco 011/2003, 6 August 2003; Sitrep by Contco 035/2003, 30 August 2003.
- ²⁴ Rathmell, Developing Iraq's security sector, 38 and 40.
- ²⁵ Sitrep 067/2003, 7 March 2003.
- ²⁶ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 10 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, DVB Records, inv. no. 04045 (October 2003 – November 2004).
- ²⁷ Rathmell, Developing Iraq's security sector, 10-13.
- ²⁸ E. Muller, 'Security Sector Reform: Opbouw van Irakese veiligheidsdiensten in Zuidoost-Irak', *Militaire Spectator* 174-4 (2005); Memo C-2NLDETIRAK 003/03, 30 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ²⁹ Sitrep by Contco 018/2003, 18 January 2004, annex E (Sitrep by MND-SE).
- ³⁰ T.E. Lawrence, 'Twenty-seven articles', *Arab Bulletin*, August 1917. Quoted in, among others: OP TELIC, 58; Ricks, Fiasco, 318; Muller, 'Security Sector Reform', 166; Michiel Hegener, 'Seven pillars of wisdom van T.E. Lawrence is weer een bestseller', *NRC Handelsblad* 29 June 2004.
- ³¹ Muller, 'Security Sector Reform', 167.
- ³² The PJCC was ultimately supposed to take on four tasks: incident room, Joint Operations Room with communications to all security services, Joint Planning Staff and Joint Intelligence Committee for the exchange of intelligence. See: E. Muller, 'Security Sector Reform' 167-172.
- ³³ This involved the TAC team, the liaison team for MND CS and the anti-tank platoon, which trained the 80-strong Iraqi border police. *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 46.
- ³⁴ SFIR End Evaluation, 14-15.
- ³⁵ SFIR 2 Evaluation Report, 5-6.
- ³⁶ Sitrep by political adviser, 3 January 2004; E-mail from Soriano, 'Two civilians killed in jobs-related violence', 3 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ³⁷ Sitrep by Contco 003/2004, 3 January 2004; Sitrep by political adviser, 3 January 2004.
- ³⁸ Sitrep by Contco 003/2004, 3 January 2004.
- ³⁹ Idem; Sitrep by political adviser, 3 January 2004.
- ⁴⁰ Sitreps by Contco, 23 and 24 January 2004.
- ⁴¹ Sitrep by Contco, 12 February 2004; Operational journal C-Contco, 12 February 2004; Commander report 012/04, 12 February 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b.
- ⁴² Netherlands Ministry of Defence website – News, 21 January 2004; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 109-111.
- ⁴³ Sitrep by political adviser, 9 January 2004.

- ⁴⁴ SFIR 2 Evaluation Report, 2.
- ⁴⁵ Sitrep by Contco 45/2003, 15 February 2004.
- ⁴⁶ Operational journal C-Contco, 2 December 2003; Sitrep by Contco 130/2003, 2 December 2003.
- ⁴⁷ Public Prosecution Service press release, Arnhem, 12 June 2008.
- ⁴⁸ Sitrep by Contco 136/2003, 8 December 2003.
- ⁴⁹ Commander report 030/03, 9 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ⁵⁰ CC-21 to C-2NLBG, 'Verslag incident w20A', 18 January 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b.
- ⁵¹ For opinions on the rules of engagement applicable to Dutch military personnel in Iraq, see: P.A.L. Ducheine and G.F. Walgemoed, 'Militair functioneel geweld en de positie van militairen na "rake zaken"', *Militaire Spectator* 174-2 (2005) 48-67; M.M. Dolman et al, 'Functioneel geweldgebruik in internationale operaties: een spiegel van rechtspraak en praktijk', *Militair-Rechtelijk Tijdschrift* 98-10 (2005) 369-420; Arnhem District Court, Military Chamber, judgement on Eric. O. case, 4 May 2005.
- ⁵² House of Representatives 2002-2003, 23432, no. 116.
- ⁵³ Public Prosecution Service press release, Arnhem, 12 June 2008, 'Onderzoek naar aangiften over schietincident Irak afgerond'.
- ⁵⁴ Sitrep by Contco 155/2003, 27 December 2003; Arnhem District Court judgement, Military Chamber, 18 October 2004; judgement on Eric O. case, 4 May 2005; Closing speech by public prosecutor on Eric O. The judgements and opinions of the public prosecutor and the closing speech are available on: www.rechtspraak.nl/uitspraken and www.om.nl. Eric O.'s lawyer, Geert-Jan Knoops, wrote a book from the perspective of the accused sergeant major and the defence. See: G.J. Knoops, *Het tweede schot. Het ware verhaal over Eric O.* (Utrecht 2006).
- ⁵⁵ Incidentally, the judge decided on 4 May 2005 that chairman of the Board of Prosecutors-General Joan de Wijkerslooth's comments did not breach the assumption of "innocent until proved guilty". Arnhem District Court, Military Chamber, District Court Judgement on the Eric O. case, 4 May 2005.
- ⁵⁶ *NRC Handelsblad* 26 February 2004; *Parool* 26 February 2004; *De Telegraaf* 27 February 2004.
- ⁵⁷ *Parool* 26 February 2004.
- ⁵⁸ On 25 February 2004, Minister Kamp announced via a spokesperson that the instructions on the use of force for military personnel were "clear and unambiguous". The instructions were called clear and sufficiently robust in both the SFIR 1 Evaluation under CDS Directives no. A-5 and in the SFIR 2 Evaluation Report drawn up by the battle group commanders and their staffs.
- ⁵⁹ 'Letterlijke tekst brief', *NRC Handelsblad* 26 February 2004.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with Bulmer.
- ⁶¹ *NRC Handelsblad* 9 January 2004.
- ⁶² Sitrep by Contco 155/2003, 27 December 2003.
- ⁶³ Nicholas Blanford, 'Dutch take a 'slowly' tact in Iraq', *Christian Science Monitor* 19 December 2003. An almost identical article was published the next day: Tod Robberson, 'Calm in a sea of calamity', *The Dallas Morning News* 20 December 2003. See also: R.G. Oppelaar, 'Het Tweede Mariniersbataljon / SFIR 2', *Qua Patet Orbis* 2 (September 2004) 10.
- ⁶⁴ Sitrep by Contco 157/2003, 29 December 2003.
- ⁶⁵ Operational journal C-Contco, 1 February 2004; Sitrep 015/2004, 15 January 2004.
- ⁶⁶ Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20.
- ⁶⁷ Idem, 21; Bert van Horssen and René Moelker, 'Richard Oppelaar: Militair-diplomaat in Irak', *Kernvraag* 1 (2004) 60-68.
- ⁶⁸ Interview with Oppelaar.

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- ⁶⁹ Frago 010/03 Op White River, 25 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1; 2 NLBG, 'Op White River', 26 December 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS SAMAWAH\S-3\HFD SECTIE 3 HENGVELD, J.P.\Irak\Terug-koppeling\backbrief white snow.doc.
- ⁷⁰ Sitrep by Contco 154/2003, 26 December 2003; Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20.
- ⁷¹ Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20.
- ⁷² House of Commons, 'Iraq', 39.
- ⁷³ Sitrep by Contco, 019/2003, 19 January 2003; Sitrep by Contco 020/2003, 20 January 2003.
- ⁷⁴ J.H.P. van den Ham, 'Stabilisation Force in Iraq: an intelligence driven operation?', Qua Patet Orbis (September 2004) 13 and 15.
- ⁷⁵ Quotation from Rentenaar in: Blanford, 'Dutch take a "slowly" tact in Iraq'.
- ⁷⁶ Interview with Rentenaar: Robberson, 'Calm in a sea of calamity'; Sitrep by Contco 040/2003, 4 September 2003; Sitrep by Contco 046/2003, 10 September 2003.
- ⁷⁷ Interview with Rentenaar.
- ⁷⁸ Sitrep by political adviser, 9 January 2004.
- ⁷⁹ Van den Berg Committee, 66.
- ⁸⁰ 22 Infcoy Frago no. 001/04 Operation Thunderstruck, 29 January 2003; Frago no. 005/2004 2 NLBG Op Thunderstruck; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 77-78; Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20.
- ⁸¹ 22 Infcoy Frago no. 001/04 Operatie Thunderstruck, 29 January 2003.
- ⁸² *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 41.
- ⁸³ Sitrep by Contco 31/2003, 31 January 2003; Sitrep by Contco 32/2003, 1 February 2003; Hengeveld, 'Operaties'.
- ⁸⁴ Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20-21.
- ⁸⁵ Sitrep by Contco 059/2003, 28 February 2004; Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20-21.
- ⁸⁶ Ministry of Defence press releases made no mention of targeted operations in the period from 2 NLBG to operation Gonzalo. Defence Staff evaluations did not deal with the KTs and arrest operations either.
- ⁸⁷ The Spanish had come very close to catching number 1 on the list of suspects. Sitrep by Contco 059/2003, 28 February 2004.
- ⁸⁸ Chief of Police CPA Advisor to C-RNLM, 'Aantekening', 27 May 2004.
- ⁸⁹ 2 NLBG op ord no. 001/04 ICDC, 8 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 2b.
- ⁹⁰ Sitrep by Contco 016/2004, 16 January 2003.
- ⁹¹ Idem; C-2 NLBG to the Governor of the Province of Al Muthanna, 'Iraqi Police', 4 January 2004, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box no. 45, hard drive, BATST AS-SAMAWAH\ALGEMEEN\JURIST PRINSEN, MR F.K.\SFIR 3\Machteld legal\SSR\SSR slechte politiemensen.doc.
- ⁹² *NRC Handelsblad* 10 December 2003 and 'Irak: Mariniers gaan taken in maart overdragen aan Iraki's', ANP 9 December 2003.
- ⁹³ *Defensiekrant*, 15 April 2004.
- ⁹⁴ Hengeveld, 'Operaties', 20.

Chapter 5

Caught between a power struggle and an uprising

- ¹ Document 'Op Swatter briefing', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Operaties\Alfabetisch\Swatter.
- ² Sitrep by Contco 093/2004, 1 April 2004.
- ³ Sitrep by Contco 093/2004.
- ⁴ Op Swatter Briefing; E-mail from Colonel Van Harskamp, 22 September 2007.
- ⁵ Sitrep by Contco 094/2004.
- ⁶ Ministry of Defence news items, www.mindef.nl, 1 April 2004.
- ⁷ Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (London 2006) 197.
- ⁸ *de Volkskrant* 31 January 2004.
- ⁹ *Senate Armed Services Committee Inquiry into the treatment of detainees in us custody* (Washington 11 December 2008). For the 'Abu Ghraib' story, see: Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure* (New York 2008).
- ¹⁰ Herring and Rangwala, *Iraq in fragments*, 203.
- ¹¹ The Americans released 12 of these 21 detainees after a few weeks. A couple of months later the other 9 were handed over to the British, who interned them in the DTDF in Shaibah and released them soon after. The list can be found in the 'detainees.xls' file in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR MND-SE legal files\mail nl.
- ¹² For a situation description of the Euphrates, see: report by C Company, 26 March 2004, in: SSA Defensie, Records 3 (NL) Battle Group Iraq, box 2.
- ¹³ Several Sitreps by Contco between 15 March and 1 April 2004.
- ¹⁴ Sitrep by Contco 075/2004.
- ¹⁵ See, among others, Sitrep by Contco 089/2004, 19 (annex F) and Sitrep by Contco 096/2004, 14 (annex F).
- ¹⁶ Sitrep by Contco 093/2004, 1 April 2004.
- ¹⁷ Sitrep by Contco 096/2004, 4 April 2004.
- ¹⁸ Herring and Rangwala, *Iraq in fragments*, 202-203.
- ¹⁹ Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Iraq* (London 2006) 252-258.
- ²⁰ Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq*, 270.
- ²¹ Report by political adviser, 24 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ²² Sitrep by Contco 097/2004, 5 April 2004.
- ²³ Report by political adviser, 6 April 2004, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 849308 (October 2003 - June 2004).
- ²⁴ Sitreps by Contco 097/2004, 5 April 2004 and 098/2004, 6 April 2004.
- ²⁵ Sitrep by Contco 099/2004, 7 April 2004.
- ²⁶ NLBG intelligence summary, 9 April 2004.
- ²⁷ Sitrep by Contco 101/2004, 9 April 2004.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Report by political adviser, 9 April 2004, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 849308.
- ³⁰ Report by political adviser, 7 April 2004, in: SSA BUZA, DVB Records, file 849308.
- ³¹ Sitrep by Contco 102/2004, 10 April 2004.
- ³² Sitrep by Contco 103/2004, 11 April 2004.

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- ³³ Several NLBG intelligence summaries from this period, including those of 10 April and 15 April.
- ³⁴ Sitrep by Contco 103/2004 [incorrect number, should be: 104/2004] of 12 April 2004.
- ³⁵ Document 'beveiligingsmaatregelen', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Veiligheid\Personen veiligheid, and E-mail of 19 April 2004 and 'Aantekening' in: SSA Defensie, Records 3 (NL) Contco Iraq, box 30.
- ³⁶ See '040530 rapportage MCOP week 22' and '040606 rapportage MCOP week 23'.
- ³⁷ Sitrep by Contco 100/2004, 8 April 2004.
- ³⁸ Operational order 'Opord 002 (SFIR3)' of 26 April 2004 and operational order 'Opord 002a SFIR 3' of 9 June 2004 in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Operaties\Contingency plans and operations\NLBG SFIR3 CONOPS. Also: interview with Colonel R.H. van Harskamp (20 April 2008).
- ³⁹ Already during pre-deployment preparations this objective was thought to have been achieved. See: Presentation '1^e CT operationele verkenning', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Evaluaties en verslagen\SFIR3\Verslag Operationele Verkenning.
- ⁴⁰ Sitrep by Contco 106/2004, 14 April 2004.
- ⁴¹ Sitrep by Contco 110/2004, 18 April 2004; NLBG intelligence summary, 18 April 2004.
- ⁴² Sitrep by Contco 113/2004, 21 April 2004 and NLBG intelligence summary, 21 April 2004.
- ⁴³ Commander's update report 22-04-04, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Rapportages\NLBG\Daily commanders update.
- ⁴⁴ Report '040425 rapportage MCOP week 17'.
- ⁴⁵ Sitrep by Contco 114/2004, 22 April 2004. See also: Commander report 030-04, 22 April 2004.
- ⁴⁶ Formation and Readiness Order no. 106 C (deployment of mortar tracking radar) from CDS dated 28 April 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 17.
- ⁴⁷ Sitrep by Contco 120/2004, 29 April 2004. See also: Commander report 033-04, 30 April 2004.
- ⁴⁸ Sitrep by Contco 121/2004, 30 April 2004. See also: Commander report 034-04, 30 April 2004.
- ⁴⁹ Commander's update report 01-05-04. See also Sitrep by Contco 122/2004, 1 May 2004.
- ⁵⁰ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2003-2004, appendix 1630 and 1633.
- ⁵¹ Commander's update report 05-05-04. See also: Sitrep by Contco 138/2004, 17 May 2004, also letter from DTDF in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 17.
- ⁵² Sitrep by Contco 116/2004, 25 April 2004.
- ⁵³ Report 'Schietincident 24 april 2004 Al Khidr', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Incidenten\Waarschuwingsschoten schietincidenten, and Sitrep Contco 117/2004, 26 April 2004. See also: Commander report 031-04, 25 April 2004.
- ⁵⁴ Commander's update report 06-05-04. See also Sitrep by Contco 126/2004, 5 May 2004.
- ⁵⁵ Assessment C-3(NL)BG, Sitrep by Contco 116/2004, 25 April 2004. A similar estimate was repeated in Sitrep by Contco 127/2004 dated 6 May 2004.
- ⁵⁶ Commander's update report 13-04-04. See also Sitrep Contco 105/2004, 13 April 2004.
- ⁵⁷ *As Samawah, april - mei 2004. Rapportage door Lt-gen (b.d.) C.J.M. de Veer* (The Hague June 2004) 5-6.
- ⁵⁸ Commander's update report 28-04-04.
- ⁵⁹ *As Samawah, april - mei 2004*, 7.
- ⁶⁰ Idem, also Sitrep by Contco 131b/2004, 10 May 2004 and commander report 038-04, 11 May 2004.
- ⁶¹ Sitrep by Contco 132/2004, 11 May 2004 and commanders update report 11-05-04.

- ⁶² Sitrep by Contco 132/2004, 11 May 2004 and commanders update report 11-05-04, also commander report 040-04, 11 May 2004.
- ⁶³ Commander's update report 11-05-04.
- ⁶⁴ Assessment C-3(NL)BG in Sitrep by Contco 132/2004, 11 May 2004.
- ⁶⁵ Allawi, *The occupation of Iraq*, 273-275.
- ⁶⁶ Sitrep by Contco 135/2004, 14 May 2004 (sent 151700) and Sitrep by Contco 136/2004, 15 May 2004.
- ⁶⁷ Report '040516 rapportage MCOP week 20'.
- ⁶⁸ Sitrep by Contco 136/2004, 15 May 2004 and commanders update report 17-05-04.
- ⁶⁹ See: Stewart, *Prince of the Marshes*, 347-372.
- ⁷⁰ Interview with Major A.A.J.M. Witkamp (1 May 2008).
- ⁷¹ Sitrep by Contco 138/2004, 17 May 2004.
- ⁷² Sitrep by Contco 138/2004, 17 May 2004.
- ⁷³ Sitreps by Contco 138/2004 up to and including 150/2004. Assessment by Van Harskamp in 148/2004, 27 May 2004.
- ⁷⁴ *NRC Handelsblad* 21 May 2004.
- ⁷⁵ Letter from Minister of Defence to the House of Representatives dated 21 May 2004.
- ⁷⁶ Sitrep by Contco 142/2004, 21 May 2004.
- ⁷⁷ 'Apaches hoppen in vier dagen naar Irak', *de Volkskrant* 25 May 2004.
- ⁷⁸ Sitrep by Contco 152/2004, 31 May 2004 and Report '040606 rapportage MCOP week 23'.
- ⁷⁹ Commander report 050-04, 22 June 2004.
- ⁸⁰ Sitrep by Contco 174/2004, 22 June 2004.
- ⁸¹ Allawi, *The occupation*, 274-275. At NLBG: commander's update report 29-05-04.
- ⁸² Report by political adviser 2, 12 June 2004 and report by political adviser 1, 13 June 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ⁸³ Sitrep by Contco 165/2004, 13 June 2004 and Report '040620 rapportage MCOP week 25'. For the assassination of Al Hassani: *de Volkskrant* 22 August 2007.
- ⁸⁴ Report by political adviser 2, 20 June 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 11.
- ⁸⁵ L. Paul Bremer III, *My year in Iraq. The struggle to build a future of hope* (New York etc. 2006), 384-396.
- ⁸⁶ Sitrep by Contco 180/2004, 28 June 2004.
- ⁸⁷ *de Volkskrant* 29 June 2004.
- ⁸⁸ John Janssen and Juul Platenburg eds., *SFIR 4. Juli - november 2004* (s.l. 2005) 74.
- ⁸⁹ Sitrep by Contco 205/2004.
- ⁹⁰ Derived from the flying times in report *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen. Rapportage door Ltgen (b.d.) C.J.M. de Veer* (November 2004).
- ⁹¹ Sitrep by Contco 204/2004.
- ⁹² See C.J. Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna: een stap verder. SFIR-4: een unieke en indrukwekkende ervaring', *Militaire Spectator* 174-4 (2005) 140-154, specifically 141.
- ⁹³ Assessment C-4(NL)BG in Sitrep by Contco 207/2004, 25 July 2004.
- ⁹⁴ Allawi, *The occupation*, 320-323 and *de Volkskrant* 6 and 7 August 2004.
- ⁹⁵ NLBG intelligence summaries, 7 August 2004.
- ⁹⁶ Sitreps by Contco 219/2004 and 220/2004.
- ⁹⁷ Sitrep by Contco 220/2004.

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- ⁹⁸ Sitrep by Contco 221/2004.
- ⁹⁹ Assessment C-4(NL)BG in Sitrep by Contco 221/2004, 8 August 2004.
- ¹⁰⁰ Minutes of provincial security council of 9 August 2004 in: NLBG intelligence summary, 11 August 2004.
- ¹⁰¹ Sitrep by Contco 222/2004.
- ¹⁰² Sitrep by Contco 223/2004.
- ¹⁰³ Sitrep by Contco 224/2004.
- ¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Sitreps by Contco 225/2004, 226/2004 and 230/2004.
- ¹⁰⁵ NLBG intelligence summaries, 14 August 2004.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen*, 5; Sitrep by Contco 224/2004.
- ¹⁰⁷ Interview with Major J.E. Mustert (23 November 2009).
- ¹⁰⁸ See: "Rapportage betreffende een schietincident op 10 augustus 2004 te Ar Rumaythah" in: SSA Defensie, 4 (NL) Battle Group Iraq Archive, box 5.
- ¹⁰⁹ *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen*, 6-7.
- ¹¹⁰ Idem, 9. Also: commander reports CM 08-08 dated 17 (1) Aug., CM 08-09 dated 17 (2) Aug., and CM 08-10 dated 17 (3) Aug. from NLBG S1 to Contco, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 18.
- ¹¹¹ According to company commander Major Mustert in *Zembla* documentary 'Dodelijke hinderlaag in Irak', broadcast on 7 April 2005. Also: E. Mustert, 'Naschrift van commandant B-Cie 13 Infbat Lumbl RSPB' in 'Een hinderlaag met dodelijke afloop', *Infanterie* 10-2 (June 2005) 4-10, specifically 8-10.
- ¹¹² Witness statements from Lance Corporal A. Ybema and Sergeant J. Maat in *Zembla* documentary 'Dodelijke hinderlaag in Irak'.
- ¹¹³ *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen*, 13. Five were so severely wounded that they were evacuated to the Netherlands for further treatment.
- ¹¹⁴ Sitrep by Contco 228/2004.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen*, 24.
- ¹¹⁶ See, among others: interview with Minister of Defence Kamp in *de Volkskrant* 19 August 2004.
- ¹¹⁷ Sitrep by Contco 229/2004. The same assessment was made by C-NLBG in Sitrep by Contco 230/2004.
- ¹¹⁸ Several NLBG intelligence summaries between 15 and 23 August.
- ¹¹⁹ Sitrep by Contco 229/2004.
- ¹²⁰ NLBG intelligence summary, 14 August 2004.
- ¹²¹ NLBG intelligence summary, 16 August 2004.
- ¹²² Assessment C-4(NL)BG in Sitrep by Contco 233/2004.
- ¹²³ NLBG intelligence summary, 19 August 2004.
- ¹²⁴ Sitrep by Contco 229/2004.
- ¹²⁵ Sitrep by Contco 230/2004.
- ¹²⁶ Interview with Major E.G.B. Wieffer (18 June 2010); Interview with Major P.J. Hageman (31 March 2010); Interview with Mustert.
- ¹²⁷ E-mail correspondence between Colonel Matthijssen and authors, 29 April 2010.
- ¹²⁸ *Ar Rumaythah 14 - 15 augustus 2004. Reconstructie van gebeurtenissen*; Interview with Wieffer; Interview with Mustert; Interview with Hageman.
- ¹²⁹ Letter from Minister of Defence to Dutch Parliament, 19 August 2004.
- ¹³⁰ Assessment C-4(NL)BG in Sitrep by Contco 235/2004.

- ¹³¹ Sitrep by Contco 230/2004 and NLBG intelligence summary, 18 August 2004.
- ¹³² Sitrep by Contco 233/2004 and fax message 'Proces Verbaal schietincident d.d. 20 augustus 2004 te As Samawah' in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 8.
- ¹³³ See Sitreps by Contco 236/2004, 237/2004 and 240/2004.
- ¹³⁴ See Sitreps by Contco 239/2004 and 242/2004.
- ¹³⁵ C.J. Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna: een stap verder', 146.
- ¹³⁶ Sitrep by Contco 240/2004.
- ¹³⁷ Assessment by C-1(NL)BG SFIR-4 in Sitrep by Contco 247/2004.
- ¹³⁸ NLBG intelligence summary, 17 September 2004.
- ¹³⁹ Sitrep by Contco 249/2004. See also 'Frago 47.04 Kyodo', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Operaties\Alfabetisch\Kyodo.
- ¹⁴⁰ Sitrep by Contco 250/2004.
- ¹⁴¹ Sitreps by Contco 264/2004 and 274/2004.
- ¹⁴² Sitreps by Contco 255/2004 and 256/2004.
- ¹⁴³ Sitrep by Contco 279/2004. See also commander report 2 October 2004 in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 9.
- ¹⁴⁴ Sitrep by Contco 281/2004.
- ¹⁴⁵ In their *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (2007), the US armed forces also use the term 'mosaic war'.
- ¹⁴⁶ See *Army Doctrine Publication II C*.
- ¹⁴⁷ C.J. Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna: een stap verder', 153-154.
- ¹⁴⁸ This comparison was used in many Sitreps by the NLBGs and in the ministry's press releases.

Chapter 6

Reconstruction

- ¹ René Heinrichs, 'Ik schaam me dat we de bevolking in de steek gelaten hebben' in: Pim van Harten and Roel Meijer eds., *Irak in chaos: botsende visies op een humanitaire ramp* (Amsterdam 2007) 270-271.
- ² 'Thuisfront wil meer bescherming in Irak', *de Volkskrant* 18 August 2004; 'Steun je militair en loop niet te zeiken', *de Volkskrant* 20 August 2004; 'Kamp wil voor thuisfront risico's niet wegpoetsen', *ANP* 25 August 2004.
- ³ Joeri Boom, 'Voor de Irakezen is Nederland een vijand', *De Groene Amsterdammer* 21 August 2004.
- ⁴ Sitrep by Contco 092/2004, 31 March 2004.
- ⁵ The overall SFIR operation cost 144.5 million euros. See SFIR End Evaluation 19.
- ⁶ Thomas Erdbrink, 'Met soldaten én geld in Zuid-Irak', *NRC Handelsblad* 28 July 2003.
- ⁷ Interview with Swijgman.
- ⁸ C. Homan, 'The Dutch battalion in Bosnia-Herzegovina and CIMIC projects in the period 1996-2002', *NL-ARMS* 2002, 95-96.
- ⁹ See e.g. comments by Ken Caldwell, director of NGO Save the Children, on the military role in the civil domain. House of Commons Defence Committee, *Iraq: An Initial Assessment of Post Conflict Operation*, Sixth Report of session 2004-5, volume 1 (HC 65-1, 24 March 2005) 74.

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- ¹⁰ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2003-2004, 28600 x no. 45 (19 May 2003), Civil-Military Cooperation Policy Framework.
- ¹¹ Proceedings of the House of Representatives 2003-2004, 86-4993, no. 86.
- ¹² Directorate of Operations, 'Evaluatie CIMIC in Irak 2003-2005', 29 July 2005, 6. Henceforth: CIMIC Evaluation. (See: NIMH intern research SFIR/CIMIC, annex 11, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21).
- ¹³ For inadequate training for CIMIC personnel see: CIMIC Evaluation, 17.
- ¹⁴ 'Minutes of Meeting 1 Aug 06', in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 6, Nommensen\CIMIC\Minutes of Meeting1 Aug 06.doc.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Major W. van den Berg (9 May 2008).
- ¹⁶ Interview with Swijman; 'Contacten militair en civiel', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ¹⁷ 'Kasboek CERP', 23 October 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 6, Nommensen\Projecten\KASBOEK CERP tbv MND verantwoording.xls. In total, over four months 1 NLBG spent 1,522,790 US dollars of CPA funds and 486,820 US dollars of CERP funds.
- ¹⁸ Chr. Van Dinteren, 'CIMIC: significant langs de zijlijn', *Qua Patet Orbis* (September 2004) 32-33.
- ¹⁹ 'Verslag besteding gelden, beschikbaar gesteld door het Ministerie van Ontwikkelings Samenwerking ten behoeve van CIMIC projecten van SFIR tijdens de uitzending van de Nederlandse Battle Group in Irak 2004-2005' (henceforth: 2004-2005 MDC funds report), 6, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21 (NIMH SFIR/CIMIC intern research, annex 12); Interview with Major J.J. Lussenburg (5 May 2008).
- ²⁰ Erdbrink, 'Met soldaten én geld in Zuid-Irak'; *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 149-150.
- ²¹ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 20 October 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ²² Interview with Swijman; Interview with Rentenaar.
- ²³ Interview with Rentenaar.
- ²⁴ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 11 September 2003.
- ²⁵ SFIR 1 Evaluation in line with CDS Directive no. A-5, 7.
- ²⁶ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 1*, 162.
- ²⁷ SFIR 1 Evaluation in line with CDS Directive no. A-5.
- ²⁸ Mark S. Martins, 'The Commander's Emergency Response Program', *Joint Forces Quarterly* 37 (2005) 49; Sitrep by Contco 099/2003, Annex F: Sitrep by NR 010 MND CS, 2 November 2003; Sitrep by political adviser 1, 25 November 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ²⁹ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 30 November 2003.
- ³⁰ Sitrep by Contco, 036/2004, 5 February 2004; For "gouden dagen (golden age)", see: *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 145.
- ³¹ 'QIPS/CERP Background and Update', 14 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ³² 'Handover files C-CSE', in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 2 Records, box 45, hard drive: CIMIC AS-SAMAWAH\CDT.NL CIMIC SUPPORT ELEMENT POSTHUMUS, M.J.\Handover files c.doc.
- ³³ Sitrep by Contco 120/2003, 22 November 2003; Van Dinteren, 'CIMIC: significant langs de zijlijn', 32.
- ³⁴ Memo C 2NLDETIRAK 007/04, 1 February 2004.
- ³⁵ *AP ondersteuning NL*, 31 January 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21 (NIMH CIMIC intern research, annex 8, CD-ROM Major C. van Dinteren).
- ³⁶ E-mail correspondence with Major M.J. Posthumus, 22 April 2008.
- ³⁷ 'Geldstromen', 14 August 2003, in: SSA Defensie, Contco Stabilisation Force Iraq 1 Records, CD-ROM no. 6, Nommensen\Projecten financieel\120803 Onderkende geldstromen.doc; MND SE Frago 89 to OPO 005/03 – Commander's Emergency Response Programme (CERP), 21 August 2003, in: idem, CD-ROM no. 6, Nommensen\CIMIC\CERP FRAGO.doc; Sitrep Contco 207/2004, 5 februari 2004; 'QIPS/CERP Background and Update', 14 January 2004.
- ³⁸ Sitrep by Contco 053/2004, 22 February 2004.

- ³⁹ See: 'Overzicht (geschatte) financiën SFIR 1 t/m 5', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21.
- ⁴⁰ 'Tekst bezoek DCBC', 9 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21.
- ⁴¹ 2004-2005 MDC funds report, 19. For figures on energy consumption in Al Muthanna, see also: 'Japan completes \$ 1.5 billion grant funding for the Iraq reconstruction', Embassy of Japan, Washington DC, Press Release 2005.
- ⁴² Sitrep by Contco 053/2004, 22 February 2004; Major J. van Haalen, 'AAR/LL Verkenningsspartij Irak 9 februari - 20 februari 2004', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21 (NIMH SFIR/ CIMIC intern research, annex 9). For the sum of 23 million US dollars, see: E-mail 'goc update 3odeco3', 31 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁴³ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 14.
- ⁴⁴ 'Tekst bezoek DCBC' and MND SE letter, 9 December 2003, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21 (NIMH SFIR/CIMIC intern research, annex 8, CD-ROM Major C. van Dinteren).
- ⁴⁵ E-mail correspondence with Posthumus.
- ⁴⁶ The balance sheet deficit for 2 NLBG was transformed into a surplus of over 44,460 US dollars when the battle group's projects listed in MND SE administration were added. See: 'Statement', 20 July 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4. For the allegations of corruption: VARA, *De Ochtenden*, 'Militairen in Irak nemen steekpenningen aan', 24 March 2004.
- ⁴⁷ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 326.
- ⁴⁸ Sitrep by Contco 064/2004, 4 March 2004; 'CPA Memorandum', 14 June 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 1.
- ⁴⁹ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 26 February 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁵⁰ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 22 February 2004 and Sitrep by political adviser 1, 8 March 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁵¹ Sitrep by Contco 129/2004, 8 May 2004.
- ⁵² Sitrep by Contco 162/2004, 10 June 2004.
- ⁵³ Sitreps by Contco 092/2004, 31 March 2004 and 162/2004, 10 June 2004.
- ⁵⁴ For the estimate of 11 million US dollars see: NIMH SFIR/CIMIC intern research, annex 4, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 21.
- ⁵⁵ Progress report for the period 8 August up to and including 13 August 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\CIMIC\CIMIC team leader spul\CGN\voortgangsrapportages\verslag 8.
- ⁵⁶ *Herinneringsboek SFIR 2*, 148.
- ⁵⁷ Sitrep by political adviser 1, 26 February 2004.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ E-mail 'CIMIC', 26 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁶⁰ 'Fiche n.a.v. gesprek met Japanse Defat en 1^e Secretaris', 28 July 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Correspondentie DOC\DCBC0669.ZIP.
- ⁶¹ 'Ervaringen met Japanners tijdens SFIR 3 in de periode van 15 maart t/m 26 mei 2004', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ⁶² Sitrep by Contco 082/2004, 21 March 2003; 'NLBG CIMIC en het Japanse Humanitaire Hulpbataljon', 14 May 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ⁶³ Sitrep by Contco 108/2004, 16 April 2004.
- ⁶⁴ CPA Memorandum, 14 June 2004.
- ⁶⁵ Sitrep by Contco 173/2004, 21 June 2004.
- ⁶⁶ SCO to C-3(NL)CONTCO IRAK, 23 June 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Correspondentie DOC\DCBC0565 goodwill geld.ZIP.

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- ⁶⁷ Sitrep by Contco 174/2004, 20 June 2004; Interview with Major (Rtd.) O. Bruijs (2 June 2008).
- ⁶⁸ Sitrep by Contco 145/2004, 24 May 2004. See also: Sitrep by Contco 119/2003, 28 April 2004.
- ⁶⁹ DOC/J3B to C-3(NL)Contco Iraq, 'Diversen', 14 June 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Correspondentie doc (specifically: DCBC0536); SCO to C-3(NL)Contco Iraq, 'Stavaza diverse onderwerpen', 23 June 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Correspondentie DOC\DCBC0565 goodwill geld.ZIP.
- ⁷⁰ Sitrep by Contco 194/2004, 12 July 2004.
- ⁷¹ SCO to C-3(NL) DET IRAQ, 'Assessment', 13 July 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR 051012\Correspondentie DOC\DCBC0632 Cobelens Harskamp.ZIP.
- ⁷² Sitrep by Contco 172/2004, 20 June 2003, Front page of NL Contingent Commando Iraq.
- ⁷³ Sitrep by political adviser 2, 26 June 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ⁷⁴ 'Actiepunten', 28 July 2004, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\Backup uitgepakt\Groups\CONTCO\HYPERT_CONTCO\ONTVANGEN.
- ⁷⁵ Interview with Major B.E. de Heer (29 May 2008).
- ⁷⁶ Document 'QIPS/CERPS: Background and update', 14 January 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 4.
- ⁷⁷ Sitrep by Contco 197/2004, 15 July 2004, Assessment C-4(NL)BG; For the Italian brigade, Major de Heer named the sum of four to six million euros. Interview with De Heer.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with Bruijs; Sitrep by Contco 260/2004, 16 September 2004.
- ⁷⁹ 2004-2005 MDC funds report, 19.
- ⁸⁰ Interview with Lieutenant Colonel W.J.A. Smeets (23 May 2008); Interview with De Heer.
- ⁸¹ Sitrep by Contco 197/2004, 15 July 2004, Assessment C-4(NL)BG.
- ⁸² The succession and personal protection of the political advisers were a constant source of worry. Finding successors for both the political advisers continued to be a problem in 2004-2005. See, among others: Sitrep by Contco 053/2004.
- ⁸³ E-mail correspondence between Colonel Matthijssen and the authors, 29 April 2010.
- ⁸⁴ Interview with De Heer; CIMIC Evaluation, 19.
- ⁸⁵ Interview with De Heer; Interview with Van den Berg.
- ⁸⁶ Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna: een stap verder', 146 and Sitrep by Contco 254/2004, 10 September 2004.
- ⁸⁷ SSR SFIR 4 step-by-step plan, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 12.
- ⁸⁸ Sitrep by Contco 263/2004, including annex E, Sitrep by Prov. Governate Mentor for Al Muthanna. For the establishment process of the battalion: Sitreps by Contco 266/2004, 267/2004, 270/2004, 280/2004, 291/2004, 292/2004, 294/2004.
- ⁸⁹ See '061004 Fact sheet Traffic Police' and '021004 Fact sheet Spoorweg politie', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\02_SIE S2\RESTRICTED_Thema's\IP Overview\01 AS SAMAWAH\04 AANVERWANTE DIENSTEN (VALLEN NIET ONDER IP).
- ⁹⁰ Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna', 144-145.
- ⁹¹ PJCC SFIR 3 Evaluation Report, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\PJCC\Evaluatieverslagen PJCC.
- ⁹² See: 'Aantekening', in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 5.
- ⁹³ 'Rapportage week 31' as annex E to Sitrep by Contco 214/2004.
- ⁹⁴ SSR SFIR 4 Step-by-step plan.
- ⁹⁵ See '040627 rapportage MCOP week 26'.

- ⁹⁶ cv Lt. Col. Kareem and cv Kareem, in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\A-team\TIC\SFIR4 en 5\HOTO UK. See also document '281004 1B Voorbeelden corruptie Kareem PJCC' in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\A-team\TIC\SFIR4 en 5\02) ARCHIEF\00) PATROUILLE RAPPORTEN\2004\10) Oktober.
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- ⁹⁸ *de Volkskrant* 20 and 21 October 2004.
- ⁹⁹ Report by political adviser, 20 December 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 10.
- ¹⁰⁰ Matthijssen, 'Al Muthanna', 144. See also Sitreps by Contco 251/2004, 252/2004, 258/2004 and 288/2004.
- ¹⁰¹ Sitrep by NLBG, 24 October 2004.
- ¹⁰² E-mail correspondence between Captain (Rtd.) J. Steller and the authors, 26 November 2008.
- ¹⁰³ Letter from Matthijssen, 31 October 2004 and Internal Memorandum 'Opleidingen IP en ING' by RNLA Staff of the Training Command, in: SSA Defensie, Staff of the Commander of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee Records, 2004, box 19.
- ¹⁰⁴ Sitrep by Contco 240/2004, 27 August 2004.
- ¹⁰⁵ Sitrep by Contco 235/2004, 22 August 2004.
- ¹⁰⁶ Sitrep by Contco 240/2004, 27 August 2004.
- ¹⁰⁷ Sitrep by Contco 245/2004, 1 September 2004.
- ¹⁰⁸ Sitrep by Contco 288/2004, 14 October 2004.
- ¹⁰⁹ '040829 rapportage MCOP week 35'. See also Sitrep by Contco 237/2004.
- ¹¹⁰ SSR SFIR 4 Step-by-step plan.
- ¹¹¹ Juul Platenburg, 'Woestijnactie SFIR 4. Bijzondere operatie in Irak', *Armex* 88-6 (December 2004) 20-21, specifically 20.
- ¹¹² Presentations 'Buzzard staf' and 'frago 73.04 BUZZARD', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\03_SIE S3\RESTRICTED\SIE S3 HFD\FRAGO\SFIR4\OP BUZZARD.
- ¹¹³ Platenburg, 'Woestijnactie SFIR 4', 21.
- ¹¹⁴ 'Kroniek SFIR-4', in: *Herinneringsboek SFIR-4. Juli - november 2004*, 185-217.
- ¹¹⁵ E-mail correspondence between Colonel Van Dooren and the authors, 5 November 2008.
- ¹¹⁶ Sitreps by NLBG, 15 and 25 November 2004.
- ¹¹⁷ Sitrep by NLBG, 15 November 2004. See also: chronicle of 11 (NLD) Battle Group SFIR 5 in *Herinneringsboek SFIR 5*, 252.
- ¹¹⁸ See copy of construction contract 'Police Training School at Al Samawah', 1 December 2004, in: NIMH, SFIR Collection, box 11.
- ¹¹⁹ *de Volkskrant* 21 October 2004.
- ¹²⁰ *de Volkskrant* 3 November 2004.
- ¹²¹ Report by political adviser, 10 December 2004.
- ¹²² SSR report by political adviser, 20 December 2004.
- ¹²³ Document 'ING 71st Bde Muthana 10.pdf', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\02_SIE S2\RESTRICTED_Thema's_SSR (kan gebrand worden)\Iraqi Army\71st Bde. Also: Sitreps by NLBG, 13, 18, 19 and 27 December 2004.
- ¹²⁴ Document 'IRAQI ARMY (new names)', in: SSA Defensie, SFIR Records, back-up files SFIR-1 up to and including SFIR-5, hard drive no. 156, F:\SFIR extra\SFIR 5\02_SIE S2\RESTRICTED_Thema's_SSR (kan gebrand worden).

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- ¹²⁶ Sitreps by NLBG, 19 and 20 November 2004.
- ¹²⁷ Sitreps by NLBG, 24, 25 and 26 November 2004.
- ¹²⁸ Sitrep by NLBG, 17 November 2004.
- ¹²⁹ Sitrep by NLBG, 7 December 2004.
- ¹³⁰ Sitrep by NLBG, 3 December 2004.
- ¹³¹ Sitrep by Contco 268/2004, 24 September 2004.
- ¹³² Reports by political adviser, 30 November and 11 December 2004, in: SSA Defensie, 5 (NL) Contco Iraq Records, box 11.
- ¹³³ Reports by political adviser, 30 November 2004 and 3 January 2005, in: SSA Defensie, 5 (NL) Contco Iraq Records, box 11.
- ¹³⁴ Report by political adviser, 30 November 2004.
- ¹³⁵ Report by political adviser, 9 September 2004.
- ¹³⁶ Sitrep by NLBG, 4 December 2004.
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Chapter 7

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