

Snapshots from Al Muthanna province

Matt Brown

By Iraqi standards Al Muthanna Province is relatively safe. Around 1300 Dutch soldiers were replaced earlier this year by around 600 British and 450 Australian troops. The Australians are training members of Iraq's new armed forces and providing security in the province, where a Japanese military engineering contingent is also engaged in reconstruction work.

Military commanders describe the population of Al Muthanna as a close-knit community, relatively friendly and resistant to penetration by visiting insurgents. It is also dominated by Shiite Muslims and this presents significant benefits as well as potential dangers for the Australian troops now based there.

Most of the province is a type of wasteland – except for the occasional tufts of grass there isn't much vegetation and it turns into desert in the south, running into Saudi Arabia. Some of the people scrape out a hard life there but the biggest concentration is in Samawah city, just to the north of the main allied base at Camp Smitty.

The Euphrates River, which runs through the city, sustains some agriculture and offers the eye some welcome greenery and palm groves. Still, life in the town is tough and the locals are getting increasingly impatient to see the real dividends of peace: improved services and lifestyles. This will be one of the key pressure points the Australian force will have to deal with.

Dominating the ground

Following operational doctrine based on long experience, the Australians have already started patrolling the province, trying to win friends and ensure that the local population is comfortable with their presence. This is not going to be too difficult as the people are generally welcoming of the foreign forces who have moved through over the past two and a half years. But there are several potential hurdles.

In March, the then commander of British forces in the province, Lieutenant Colonel Tim Wilson, told me that he doesn't believe the regular use of armoured vehicles is appropriate, given the prevailing security environment in Al Muthanna. 'It's more benign than a lot of the other provinces,' he said, 'and I think that if you were to operate with armoured vehicles on a daily basis, it would be potentially fairly inflammatory.'

On his first trip into Samawah city the Australian commander, Lieutenant Colonel Roger Noble, decided to take the bar armour off the outside of some of the vehicles. He made a call on the ground, as all good commanders do. The risk of a collision with civilian vehicles and the flow-on difficulties that would pose was probably a greater

concern than being attacked by insurgents wielding a Rocket Propelled Grenade or driving a car laden with explosives.

On the first trip into town, despite concerns about security and the need to maintain a vehicle formation that was separate from the rest of the traffic, the ASLAV convoy inevitably became entangled with local trucks and cars. Trucks laden with fuel, and other local civilian vehicles wove in and out of the convoy as it headed into town. The difficult balance between force protection and community relations was as easy to see as the beaten-up old sedan that cut off an ASLAV to push over into another lane, passing a donkey-drawn cart laden with vegetables in the process. If the security situation in the province deteriorates, that sort of routine encounter with a vehicle moving in an erratic fashion could end in a serious incident.

And if the Australians were to adopt the approach taken by US troops in Iraq – pointing weapons at the cars to get them to back away – they would risk breaking down the goodwill that currently exists.

The Australians are already patrolling in the province on foot. And this will be the only way to patrol in significant, more densely populated areas, like the local market precinct where police refuse entry to most vehicles and the streets are filled with people going about their business in a bustling and vibrant scene.

Local factional balance

While Al Muthanna is Iraq's most peaceful province the figures on the Dutch battlegroup's last four months there are sobering. Between November last year and March this year they seized more than 200 anti-personnel mines, over 2000 rockets and more than 450 mortars. They also encountered 10 incidents of small-arms fire, four explosions, six hand grenades, three mortar or rocket attacks, six home-made bombs and one car bomb. One of the ambushes that claimed the life of a Dutch soldier in the north of the province involved around 40-50 insurgents, attacking at night in a relatively built-up area where air support was next to useless.

A source of real risk to the diggers may turn out to be tribal fights, criminal gangs seeking to extort money with the threat of violence and harassment, or the ambitions of little-known militia leaders. But because the province is so overwhelmingly dominated by Shiite Muslims, their dominance is also a significant risk factor if more militant factions in the Shiite community start to doubt the value of continuing to operate within the political process. Differences between Muslim militias active in the province are real. Rivalry between the militias could draw the Australians into a complicated and bitter armed conflict with and/or between members of the Shiite religious majority that dominates all of Southern Iraq.

But the dominant Shiite militia force in the province is the mainstream 'Badr Brigades' which has changed its name more recently to the Badr Organisation for Reconstruction and Development. They are the paramilitary muscle behind Iraq's dominant political grouping, The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. As such, they are most likely to continue to stick with the political process, which has delivered their political leadership control of the country. The Badr Organisation had a long history of opposing Saddam Hussein's regime. Many of its members trained and lived in exile in Iran, reportedly under the guidance and protection of Iranian military and intelligence officers. These days the Organisation is impatient to exert its authority in Iraq and demonstrate its capability as a serious paramilitary and intelligence organisation.

The Badr Organisation has long argued it should be allowed a central role in Iraq's new security apparatus. A deal to disarm it and eight other key militias has stalled. While some of the organisation's members have joined the Iraqi military and police forces, many others remain outside those command structures and they hold private weapons that are now licensed by the government.

On the dusty parade ground inside the Iraqi National Guard headquarters in Samawah city, Brigadier Awath Karim told me that the Badr Organisation provides important information about security in the province. It is, in effect, a key element of what Australian analysts would recognise as layered security in Al Muthanna. The Badr organisation's wide-reaching web of officials, militiamen, agents and allies is a core part of the network that feeds intelligence to the Iraqi forces Australia expects to take full control of Al Muthanna in less than twelve months. That means a Shiite Muslim militia, with strong links to Iran, now plays a key role in maintaining the security and stability necessary for the success of the Australian mission in the province.

And consider the security situation in Baghdad and in the neighboring provinces. In Najaf and Karbala, to the north-west of Al Muthanna, insurgents have been targeting Shiite worshippers with car bombs and other means of attack in the hope of drawing them into a doomed downwards spiral of reprisals and vigilantism. In Basrah to the east they continue to launch attacks on British troops. Sunni Muslim leaders have accused members of the Badr brigades of murdering Sunnis and acting as vigilantes. Iraqi officials have admitted the Badr Organisation has had an active role in some security operations, and Shiite political leaders have shown crowds of loyalists in Baghdad the dead bodies of members of the Badr Organisation, claiming the men had been killed by Iraqi police sympathetic to the former regime.

Local colour part of the balance

These are just a few signs of the broader strategic tensions that threaten stability in Al Muthanna. Most of the people in the province are impatient to see an improvement in basic services and their standard of living. As the ABC team was filming near the markets in Samawah city more than one local made comments to our translator, like 'What is this going to achieve?', and, 'When are they going to do something to really help?'

There are a myriad of individual rivalries and feuds that are also entwined with the political and military balance in the province. In the lead-up to the Australian deployment a

small explosion was reported at a town in the far north of Al Muthanna. Initial reports indicated it might have been a bomb attack by Muslim militants on a shop selling alcohol.

However, the police investigating the blast told their colleagues in the Iraqi National Guard that this had been a personal vendetta – a local man settling a score with another who had been a minor official in Saddam Hussein's regime. Had an Australian patrol been passing the scene at the time though they would have been presented with a difficult and potentially dangerous puzzle with no clear solution.

If the tensions wracking the rest of the nation are felt more sharply in Al Muthanna over the next year, a period in which Iraqis must decide on a new constitution and elect a new government, the risk to Australian troops in the province will rise.

These potential complications have rarely been discussed openly by Australia's political leadership. But the men and women who have had to weigh the possibilities and dangers of this mission, and perhaps confront them in the field, have been thinking about what may lie ahead.

Even in a relatively peaceful place like Al Muthanna the tactical and strategic realities on the ground can be as sticky as the late winter mud around the helicopter pads at Camp Smitty. It may not be a quagmire but it is certainly a dangerous place to lose your bearings. ♦

Matt Brown is the ABC Middle East Correspondent. He covered the recent elections in Iraq and visits regularly to monitor developments, including in Al Muthanna Province before and since the Australian Task Group deployed there.



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