

Refugee Review Tribunal

AUSTRALIA

RRT RESEARCH RESPONSE

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This response was prepared by the Country Research Section of the Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RRT within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

Questions

- 1. Previous research indicates that the governorate of Muthanna is stable and quite peaceful. Has there been any change in the general security situation in the governorate and Al Samawah?**
- 2. Is there any information to suggest there are ex-Baathist insurgents, other insurgents, Sunni Islamists, the Mehdi Army or any other “extremist” Shia groups present in Al Samawah or Muthanna?**
- 3. If any of the above are present, is there evidence that they are harming anyone, and if so, whom are they harming?**
- 4. Are there Coalition forces present in Al Samawah or Muthanna and, if so, how have they been received by local Iraqis?**

RESPONSE

- 1. Previous research indicates that the governorate of Muthanna is stable and quite peaceful. Has there been any change in the general security situation in the governorate and Al Samawah?**

News and other reports from the last three months indicate that while there have been some violent incidents in Muthanna and its capital Al Samawah recently, overall the area remains one of the more stable in Iraq. Following is a summary of violent incidents over that time, drawn from a search of news reports on Factiva, Tribunal sources, Reliefweb and the Internet, and Iraq update reports on the intelligence database *Stratfor*. They are in reverse chronological order.

An October 2005 report states that Australian troops operating in Muthanna had been fired upon by two individuals while on patrol, but “no Australians were injured and no Australian equipment was damaged”. This was the first time they had been fired upon since being stationed there, although “they have had several close calls with rocket propelled grenade and

mortar attacks” (‘Pre-vote attack on troops’ 2005, *Townsville Bulletin*, 14 October – Attachment 1).

Another October 2005 report, describing the preparations in Muthanna for voting in the recent referendum on the new Iraqi constitution, mentions that “Baghdad and the insurgent attacks...seem remote from this homogenous region” and that there had not been a bombing in the area since June (Knickmeyer, Ellen 2005, ‘Where charter is least of worries’, *Washington Post*, 7 October. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/06/AR2005100601868_pf.html – Accessed 17 October 2005 – Attachment 2).

A September 2005 report states that an explosion was reported in Muthanna, after which another explosive device found which was defused by an Iraqi explosives team (‘Suspected insurgent recruiter nabbed in Fallujah’ 2005, *Department of Defense Documents*, 30 September – Attachment 3).

An August *Stratfor* report states that Intifadh Abbas, leader of the Khuza’ee tribe in As Samawa, was kidnapped on 20 August (‘Iraq Update: Aug. 20 – 22, 2005’ 2005, *STRATFOR*, 22 August. <http://www.stratfor.biz/Story.neo?storyId=254268> – Accessed 18 October 2005 – Attachment 4).

An August 2005 report describes political clashes between the regional governor and the provincial council in Samawa after protesters demanded the governor’s resignation. The leading Shia party in the area is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) but rival supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr were also involved and reportedly fired rockets at police (Fadhil, Hamed 2005, ‘Political turmoil hits Iraq town after protests’, *Reuters*, 10 August – Attachment 5).

Another August *Stratfor* report refers to the same incident, stating:

AS SAMAWA – Insurgents attack Iraqi police with rocket-propelled grenades in a second day of unrest sparked by protests, when hundreds of demonstrators demanding better services called for the town governor’s resignation. Iraqi police shot and killed one protester and wounded 40 (‘Iraq Update: Aug. 6-8, 2005’ 2005, *STRATFOR*, 8 August, <http://www.stratfor.biz/Story.neo?storyId=253333> – Accessed 18 October 2005 – Attachment 6).

Another August 2005 report states that:

Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari sent a government delegation to the turbulent southern town of Samawah, where police on Sunday shot and killed one of hundreds of angry demonstrators who were demanding more electricity and more water (Knickmeyer, Ellen & Alsaffar, Khalid 2005, ‘Amid a Miasma of Sand and Fear, Some Iraqis Recall a Brighter Day’, *Washington Post*, 9 August *Post*, 9 August – Attachment 7).

A July *Stratfor* report states that two policemen were killed by a roadside bomb between the towns of As Samawa and Ad Diwaniyah. It was thought to have been planted by Sunni Nationalist insurgents (‘Iraq Update: July 13-14, 2005’ 2005, *STRATFOR*, 14 July. <http://www.stratfor.biz/Story.neo?storyId=251745> – Accessed 18 October 2005 – Attachment 8).

An older report from May 2005 by Michael Knights for *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, comments that:

The multi-ethnic Basra and Muthanna provinces have also suffered a higher rate of Sunni Arab terrorist attacks on civilians and government personnel than other predominantly Shi'a provinces. (Knights, Michael 2005, 'Battle for Iraq lies in the south' 2005, *Janes Intelligence Review*, 23 May – Attachment 9).

2. Is there any information to suggest there are ex-Baathist insurgents, other insurgents, Sunni Islamists, the Mehdi Army or any other “extremist” Shia groups present in Al Samawah or Muthanna?

3. If any of the above are present, is there evidence that they are harming anyone, and if so, whom are they harming?

Reports indicate that the Muthanna area is controlled by the mainstream Shia group the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military arm the Badr Brigade. More extreme groups such as the supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, and Sunni nationalist insurgents, occasionally make their presence felt, but do not appear to have much power in the area. Of the violent incidents listed in the previous question, most had soldiers or policemen as their targets.

An October 2005 report mentions that when the Australian army arrived in Muthanna in April 2005, “the local Badr chief proclaimed his armed supporters ensured provincial security” (‘US strategy in Iraq all but irrelevant’ 2005, *Canberra Times*, 6 October – Attachment 10).

A September 2005 report from *The Economist* states that Muthanna is “fairly tranquil” compared to other areas in the south like Basra, but it is “dominated by the local officials of SCIRI” (‘The south is a mess too’ 2005, *The Economist*, 22 September – Attachment 11).

Another August report quotes a Muqtada al-Sadr spokesman, who claims to be able to mobilise Shia votes against the new constitution in six provinces, including Samawah (‘Al-Sadr reasserts himself-this time against coreligionists’ 2005, *RFE/RL Iraq Report Vol. 8, No. 29*, 26 August – Attachment 12).

Another August 2005 report quotes the opinion of the coalition forces stationed in Muthanna that Sadr’s militia does not have a presence in Muthanna, only his political organisation. Sadr’s followers are said to “piggy back on whatever the problem is” but “they don’t really have any power. They are more of a nuisance” (Hess, P. 2005, ‘A peaceful Iraqi town, far from Baghdad’, *Washington Times*, source: United Press International, 8 August <http://www.washingtontimes.com/upi/20050808-023722-4442r.htm> – Accessed 24 August 2005 – Attachment 13).

One example of the tactics of Sadr’s followers is the firing of rockets at police in the course of a protest in Samawa (Fadhil, Hamed 2005, ‘Political turmoil hits Iraq town after protests’, *Reuters*, 10 August – Attachment 5).

Other more extreme groups are occasionally mentioned in reports as having a presence in the area.

A dossier of Iraqi Resistance groups compiled by Robert Lindsay mentions one such group, which took hostage (and later released) some Japanese workers in Samawah:

Seraya al Mujahedin/Mujahedin Brigades (SAM) – SAM is probably mixed Sunni/Shia Islamist group but this needs confirmation. The Mossad website Debka.com claimed they were Shia Islamists, but Debka is often inaccurate in their reporting on the Iraqi resistance so this will await confirmation. SAM operates in a wide area of central and southern Iraq, including **Samawah**, Hilla, Baghdad, Abu Ghurayb, Fallujah, Ramadi, Khaldiya and Tikrit. The fact that the group operates easily in both Shia Samawah and Sunni Tikrit implies it may be a mixed Sunni/Shia group. SAM first appeared on April 8-9, 2004 during the Mahdi Uprising and immediately became notorious for the seizure of a number of hostages.

SAM seized three Japanese workers in Samawah, two human rights workers in Baghdad, a journalist in Baghdad (seized on April 8) and KBR employee Thomas Hamill in Abu Ghurayb (seized on April 9). SAM threatened to burn the three Japanese workers alive unless Japan pulled its troops out of Iraq in three days. The group released a videotape showing masked guerillas with weapons menacing three frightened-looking, blindfolded Japanese citizens. It later appeared that some of the Japanese might have known their captors and the whole thing may have been staged.

SAM released the Japanese hostages on April 15. A few days after Hamill's seizure, SAM released a videotape showing Hamill sitting in a chair under an Iraqi flag. The tape threatened to kill Hamill within 24 hours unless Marines lifted the siege of Fallujah. Hamill was found south of Tikrit on May 2, three weeks after his capture. SAM had actually treated him quite well. On April 13, SAM posted flyers all over Baghdad saying the mujahedin in Fallujah, Ramadi and Khaldiya would soon be sending a force to Baghdad to assist the Mahdi Army in their major battles with US troops in Baghdad

(Lindsay, Robert 2005, 'Dossier: Iraqi Resistance Groups', *INN exclusive*, 15 April – Attachment 14).

A July *Stratfor* report states that two policemen were killed by a roadside bomb which was thought to have been planted by Sunni nationalist insurgents ('Iraq Update: July 13-14, 2005' 2005, *STRATFOR*, 14 July, <http://www.stratfor.biz/Story.neo?storyId=251745> – Accessed 18 October 2005 – Attachment 8).

4. Are there Coalition forces present in Al Samawah or Muthanna and, if so, how have they been received by local Iraqis?

Reports indicate that in the province of Muthanna there are over 1000 coalition forces, consisting of 450 Australians, and about 600 British. There are also about 600 non-combatant Japanese troops who are building roads and other facilities in the area. The British have overall command of security forces in the southern provinces of Iraq, including Muthanna. The coalition's main tasks in Muthanna besides simply maintaining security are to protect the Japanese engineers, and to train the Iraqi military and police in the area. The Iraqi forces are expected to take over responsibility for security in Muthanna during 2006. Reports indicate that relations between the coalition forces and the local Iraqis are generally good, although some reports quoted in Question 1 indicate that the coalition is occasionally attacked by various insurgent forces.

The following reports are presented in reverse chronological order.

An October 2005 report states that 450 Australian troops will fly to Iraq to replace those already in Muthanna. They were expected to be the last that would be sent to Iraq, as no further troops were being "trained for a future rotation". Their task was to "help protect Japanese engineers working on reconstruction projects in the region" and they "would also help continue to train Iraqi security forces and manage a range of community reconstruction

projects” (Michelmore, Karen 2005, ‘Howard thanks latest Aussie troops bound for Iraq’, *Australian Associated Press*, 15 October – Attachment 15).

A September 2005 report from a Japanese newspaper discusses the Japanese Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) troops who are on a humanitarian reconstruction mission in Muthanna, stating that they could be withdrawn in 2006:

There are about 600 GSDF personnel stationed in Samawah reconstructing public facilities and providing medical support. About 450 Australian soldiers also are stationed in Samawah. British troops, which are in charge of security for all of southern Iraq, have about 600 soldiers in Muthanna Province, which includes Samawah.

Australia has already informed Japan of its plan to withdraw its troops from Iraq in May. Britain also is considering a gradual pullout in 2006 or later of its troops from areas in Iraq that are fairly secure.

Some within the government have said it would be difficult for the GSDF to maintain safety in the area if Australian and British troops withdrew. But other government officials have said it would be necessary to shift the focus of Japanese activities in Iraq from using GSDF troops to other forms of support, such as official development assistance, considering the rehabilitation efforts in Samawah are nearly complete.

In December 2003, the government endorsed in a Cabinet meeting the basic plan to dispatch GSDF troops to Iraq under the special law. The mission was extended for another year in December 2004.

The GSDF mission is slated to expire on Dec. 14, but the Iraqi government has asked Japan to stay in Iraq through 2006 and perhaps later. The Japanese government is certain that the multinational force will be in Iraq beyond 2006 and believe it would look bad if the GSDF left early (‘Govt may pull GSDF out of Iraq in ’06 1st half’ 2005, *Daily Yomiuri*, 29 September – Attachment 16).

Another September report states that the Australian troops could be withdrawn from Muthanna by May 2006. It was expected that the responsibility for security across Iraq would be transferred to the Iraqis over the next 12-18 months (‘Houston says troops gone from Al-Muthanna by May’ 2005, *Australian Associated Press Financial News Wire*, 27 September – Attachment 17).

An August 2005 defence briefing by the Commander of the multinational division of the southeast of Iraq, Major General Dutton, contains some relevant remarks about Muthanna:

- The four provinces under his command in the south-east are Al Basra, Al Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan.
- Unemployment in Muthanna is 46%.
- Over the whole four provinces, there are over 13,000 coalition soldiers, as well as the new Iraqi army division.
- The region is relatively quiet, with about 14-18 security incidents a week, a figure which has remained stable (‘Defense briefing by British Royal Marines Maj.Gen. J.B. Dutton’ 2005, *Federal News Service*, 5 August – Attachment 18).

Another August 2005 on coalition forces stationed in Muthanna gives an impression of generally amicable relations with the local population (Hess, P. 2005, 'A peaceful Iraqi town, far from Baghdad', *Washington Times*, source: United Press International, 8 August <http://www.washingtontimes.com/upi/20050808-023722-4442r.htm> – Accessed 24 August 2005 – Attachment 13).

A March 2005 report on British troops in southern Iraq contains further relevant information:

- Although the arrival of British troops was “greeted by a rocket fired at the camp, Muthanna is considered one of the quietist provinces in Iraq”.
- While the Dutch contingent (which was replaced by the Australians) was there, not one soldier was killed or wounded.
- “Samawah has a population of 215,000 people, the vast majority Shia, who wave at coalition convoys.” (Poole, Oliver 2005, 'More responsibilities for British troops', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March, The King's Own Scottish Borderers Association web site <http://www.kosb-edinburgh-branch.co.uk/guestbook.php?table=guestbook&o=400> – Accessed 17 October 2005 – Attachment 19).

Two more reports may be of interest as they discuss the kinds of humanitarian projects underway in Muthanna.

A Government of Japan press release provides details of the various highway reconstruction projects Japan is undertaking (Government of Japan 2005, 'Grassroots Human Security Grant Aid to Iraq', *ReliefWeb*, 29 June <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/VBOL-6DTHSX?OpenDocument&rc=3&cc=irq> – Accessed 17 October 2005 – Attachment 20).

An August 2005 report describes the renovation of a police station ('Successes this week in Iraq, Aug.19-25' 2005, *US Fed News*, 26 August – Attachment 21).

List of Sources Consulted

Internet Sources:

Google search engine

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UNHCR Refugee Information Online

UN ReliefWeb

STRATFOR

Databases:

Public *FACTIVA*

Reuters Business Briefing

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REFINFO

IRBDC Research Responses (Canada)

RRT *ISYS*

RRT Country Research database, including

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch,

US Department of State *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices*.

RRT Library *FIRST*

RRT Library Catalogue

List of Attachments

1. 'Pre-vote attack on troops' 2005, *Townsville Bulletin*, 14 October. (FACTIVA)
2. Knickmeyer, Ellen 2005, 'Where charter is least of worries', *Washington Post*, 7 October http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/06/AR2005100601868_pf.html – Accessed 17 October 2005.
3. 'Suspected insurgent recruiter nabbed in Fallujah' 2005, *Department of Defense Documents*, 30 September. (FACTIVA)
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18. 'Defense briefing by British Royal Marines Maj.Gen. J.B. Dutton' 2005, *Federal News Service*, 5 August. (FACTIVA)
19. Poole, Oliver 2005, 'More responsibilities for British troops', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March, The King's Own Scottish Borderers Association web site <http://www.kosb-edinburgh-branch.co.uk/guestbook.php?table=guestbook&o=400> – Accessed 17 October 2005.
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