A Gentle Occupation

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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. 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. 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. 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. 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 GST’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. 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.”

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.”

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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 mafioso 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{22} Andrews’ poor performance was recognised in the higher CPA echelons, but it took until November for them to replace him.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 Governate 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
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at length for the cameras as if they were presidential candidates. 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.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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
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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. 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. 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.

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 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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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‘iyya, 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‘iyya hierarchy were Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasim al Khoei and, after his death in 1992, Grand Ayatollah Ali al Husseini 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 ‘Sadrists’. 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, INLBG 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
Governing in the midst of chaos

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. 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. 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.

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.
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. 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. 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.

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.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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. 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 (kct) 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. 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”. 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.

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. 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. 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
A Gentle Occupation

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. 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. 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.

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 Muthannna model will undoubtedly have to be adjusted from time to time.”

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. 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. The tone was set for 2004.