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The faltering ‘project machine’

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

One factor which seemed to contribute to the growing gap between the Dutch and the Iraqis was the reduction in funds which the NLBG could spend to improve the living conditions of the local population. This decline had been going on for several months. The ‘project machine’, which at the start of 2004 had been operating at full capacity using many millions of US dollars from Coalition funds, began to falter in the course of the spring as the CPA reduced the flow. Less and less did the Iraqis see ‘the Dutch flag flying’ over a renovated school or medical post, and the NLBG commander...
was no longer able to cut ribbons every week for the local media’s cameras. This prospect greatly concerned Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp of 3 NLBG when he took up his post in March 2004. In addition to intelligence gathering and normal framework (security) operations, his predecessors had stressed that Cimic was one of the pillars of Dutch military success in Al Muthanna.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Civil-Military Cooperation in practice

The financial shortfall anticipated by Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman did not occur during his period of command. On 6 August, the Dutch representative at CPA-South, Major Kortenhoeven, was pleased to announce that – just like the British and Italian brigades – NLBG could collect 200,000 US dollars of cerp funds from the British divisional headquarters, as the Americans had decided to open up the fund to its Coalition allies.14 The cerp fund was known as “Saddam’s shoebox”, as until September 2003 it was made up entirely of funds confiscated from the Baath party and the liquidated assets of the toppled dictator himself.15 There was a second major financial fund for the NLBG: the reconstruction fund which the central occupation authority made available under the control of CPA-South for funding
longer-term projects. These CFA funds were allocated to the Dutch CIMIC team in its capacity as Government Support Team. The Dutch did not hesitate to make use of this opportunity. At British headquarters, they were shown a number of shipping containers full of dollar bills packed in plastic, out of which they received their share. A couple of weeks later, the Dutch were again able to collect a further 200,000 U.S. dollars in cash. The safe at Camp Smitty was now literally overflowing.

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

At the start of the operation in Al Muthanna, the scale of CIMIC initiatives was limited. Dutch funds were negligible and there was a 10,000 U.S. dollar ceiling per CERP project. The focus was therefore initially on Quick Impact Projects such as a new playroom at the children’s hospital in As Samawah and the renovation of school buildings. After years of neglect, many school buildings had fallen into disrepair and were subsequently plundered. Anything of any value had been removed: teaching materials, window frames, taps, light fittings, electrical sockets and even the electrical wiring. Lieutenant Colonel Swijgman understood from prominent Al Muthanna residents that they attached a great deal of value to their children being able to return to school at the start of the new school year in mid-September. So the Marines initially tackled this issue “Iraqi-style” under the motto “adequate is good enough”. According to Major Rudolf Keijzer of the CIMIC section this meant “rubbish out and windows in”. Later, the section initiated further renovations. By involving the local media – who were also operating partly on Coalition project funds – they obtained maximum visibility.
For the time being the main priority of the Dutch CIMIC team, the largest yet unofficial executive service for CPA tasks in Al Muthanna, was to influence the perception of the Iraqis by ‘winning over the hearts and minds’. To this end, larger CERP projects were divided into sub-projects of 10,000 US dollars, so that the NLBG commander could sign for them himself without getting bogged down in bureaucracy. Major Keijzer, responsible for the ‘industry’ sub-area, initiated the renovation of the cement factory near As Samawah, which paved the way for CPA investment worth millions a few months later. By having the newly-elected governor Al Hassani officially reopen the factory on 18 October 2003, the Dutch ensured that the results of their efforts reflected credit on the new Iraqi administrators, who themselves had virtually no budget for doing anything. Partly due to the intensive cooperation with political adviser Michel Rentenaar at the CPA building in As Samawah, the CIMIC / Government Support Team became the main pillar for support for the occupation authority as well. In spite of the burgeoning budget controlled by the battle group, almost no direction was provided by the CPA or MND South-East and no additional guidelines were issued from The Hague.

CIMIC and Security Sector Reform (SSR) were closely related. In addition to the purchase of materials and improving the facilities of the police, the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps (later National Guard) and the Facility Protection Service, the CIMIC team even paid the operational budgets and salaries of the latter two organisations out of CERP funds. One major, Dutch-financed SSR initiative came from political adviser Rentenaar. He used his knowledge of procedures and jargon at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to write a model project proposal to request a large sum from what was known as the ‘Peace Fund’, a Dutch SSR budget. The political adviser noted that military personnel were barely conversant with drawing up project proposals like this, which detailed issues such as local requirements, feasibility and Dutch policy criteria. The Peace Fund allocated the NLBG 873,000 US dollars to spend on an emergency package of communications equipment, weapons and other police material (see chapter 4) in order to allow the police force to function to some extent at the end of 2003.

The Dutch paid all the other projects out of non-Dutch funds. The flow of CERP slowed in the autumn of 2003 but, as a de facto sub-contractor of the occupation authority, the first NLBG’s Government Support Team subsequently achieved most of its projects using funds from CPA-South. Drinking water supplies in Al Khidr were improved by purchasing a
reverse osmosis unit for converting salt water into drinking water. The Dutch also provided twenty new water tankers, which were to supply clean drinking water to a large number of desert villages not connected up to the mains.26 One crucial and time-consuming task for 1 NLBG continued to be securing fuel supplies to the province, for which CIMIC personnel arranged the logistics from the refinery in Shaibah right up to the petrol pumps in Al Muthanna.

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

“Spend the money!”

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

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

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

The maximum sum for which a brigade or battalion commander could personally sign rose at this time from 10,000 to 50,000 US dollars. From 15 January 2004, the battle group commander could even approve initiatives up to 100,000 US dollars. Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar delegated some of this responsibility to his company commanders, who were now permitted to approve projects of up to 10,000 US dollars. By now, the list of completed small and medium-sized projects was impressive. Thanks to the Dutch, for instance, sixteen kilometres of the road through As Samawah were illuminated – when there was power – and large medical storage depots had been constructed for the hospitals 1 NLBG had renovated in Al Khidr and Ar Rumaythah. The television station had also been thoroughly renovated. The various provincial and urban government services received dozens of water tankers, fuel tankers and school buses. With respect to fuel supplies, 2 NLBG arrived just in time to see the opening of the new strategic storage capacity for six million litres of petrol. In Al Khidr, a bridge was rebuilt and the cement factory opened a second production line. Of the total of 4.4
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million US dollars spent by 2 NLBG’s CIMIC team on nearly 300 projects, over 86 per cent was funded from the CERP budget, about 11 per cent from CPA funds and slightly over 2 per cent from the Dutch CIMIC reserve.39

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

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

One major driver behind the proliferation of the CIMIC process was the availability of large sums of money from Coalition sources. This seemingly positive development was also the result of CPA weakness and the absence of civilian development organisations.44 While the military operation continued apace, at the start of 2004 the Coalition devoted far too little attention and resources to equally important civilian efforts. This meant that the Dutch military had to step up its efforts in the civilian sphere on
its own initiative. The positive effect was that the enormous expenditures reflected a great deal of credit on the Dutch battle group.45 “Army fatigues” were always visible at official presentations of materials, finished projects or openings of new facilities, and the NLBG commander would always accompany CPA administrator Jim Soriano at the start or completion of major infrastructural or industrial projects.

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

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

The key role of reconstruction funds

The failing civilian reconstruction effort and the occupation’s crisis of legitimacy caused military controlled development funds to be assigned greater importance. The administrative chaos in Al Muthanna during
the early spring of 2004 underlined this and made it plain that the CIMIC task encompassed more than just winning over the hearts and minds of the Iraqis with a view to force protection. The essence of the mission was at stake as, according to Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar shortly before his departure, “the bottom [was threatening to fall out] of the new Iraqi governance model”. There was still insufficient clarity on the tasks, authorities and responsibilities of the local administrative councils, as Paul Bremer’s Order on Local Governance had spent months awaiting signature.

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

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

By the time of the change of command to 4 NLBG, Dutch military personnel had spent about 11 million US dollars on CIMIC and SSR projects,
1.2 million of which came from Dutch national funds. In addition, over 100 million US dollars in long-term project proposals had been approved by the CPA in Baghdad in early 2004. In spite of this enormous effort and the substantial sums involved, CIMIC personnel felt that their work had little effect on actual progress in Al Muthanna. And although they had successfully created support, the ‘gratitude’ of the locals had a limited shelf-life.55 A Dutch project officer for water and irrigation noticed that the Iraqis were quickly becoming more demanding. When he arrived at the provincial water department with a brand-new digger, the Iraqi official bluntly asked: “only one?”

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

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

The CIMIC team of 2 NLBG attempted to get a few major infrastructural projects on the Japanese agenda and 3 NLBG initiated five joint medium-term projects with them relating to electricity, water, agriculture and livestock.60 All hope of rapid implementation evaporated among the Dutch, however,
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when they learned of the slow bureaucratic processes for obtaining the required money from Japan. The effectiveness of the Japanese was also undermined by the extreme political sensitivity of the mission in Japan and their “unaccustomed and immature” way of conducting operations, which the Dutch military ascribed to a lack of experience.61

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

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

Two million euros for the ‘Beggar’s Army’

The vast stream of US money seemed to dry up in the summer of 2004, while Japanese funds were only finding their way to Al Muthanna in fits
and starts. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp therefore started to press for additional Dutch funds for his successors. When, at the end of May, he understood that his request had been “ruthlessly” shoved aside, he flew off the handle. In his daily report he accused colleagues in The Hague, who had turned down his proposal “sitting at desks, apparently without any background knowledge”, of narrow-mindedness.68 The reply from the Defence (Staff) Crisis Management Centre, by now renamed the Defence Operations Centre (DOC), was that they were lobbying up to ministerial level to get the flow of structural development funds from Baghdad going again. Yet the Netherlands itself did not want “to provide a budget at national level to compensate for the drying-up of CERP funds”.69

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

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

Within MND South-East, the Dutch were by now known as the “Beggar’s Army”, because the CIMIC section of 4 NLBG was working hard to prise money out of headquarters.75 The other partner countries within the division were much better funded by their own national governments. The British troops had UK government budgets during the winter that amounted to 31 million US dollars.76 Towards the end of the occupation, the UK government added another £10 million (about 17 million US dollars). The Italian government made available 4 million euros in CIMIC funds to its brigade in Dhi Qar.77
In August 2004, 4 NLBG’s CIMIC Support Element initiated an ambitious long-term project to set up a cooperative agricultural organisation in which the farmers’ unions and the Department of Agriculture of Al Muthanna were represented. At this time, 4 NLBG was becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of decisiveness among local administrators, who no longer seemed to treat the penniless Dutch as a useful partner. CIMIC personnel therefore increasingly turned to the tribal leaders with project proposals. The main international partners continued to be military, such as the US Army Corps of Engineers, which from October worked on constructing the power station that had been initiated by 2 NLBG. The relationship with the Japanese battalion was also given fresh impetus by the lack of money. Cooperation with the Japanese continued to be viewed as “an ordeal” according to CIMIC officials, but 4 NLBG nevertheless attempted to integrate a growing number of projects with the Japanese: “we built a road, they built a bridge; we built a road, they asphalted it”.

A temporary solution for the battle group’s financial problems was provided – once again – by the Americans. In July, they deposited another large sum into the CERP fund after all. The Dutch in Al Muthanna were told that they had been allocated 750,000 US dollars that had to be spent by mid-September 2004. This CERP money at least enabled 4 NLBG to make a tangible difference for a couple of months. Yet compared to previous rotations, its CIMIC Support Element – paradoxically the largest so far at thirty officials – had to spend carefully. It also remained unclear which budget 5 NLBG would be able to use to make a credible CIMIC contribution later that year.

Lack of money was certainly not the only reason for the gradual estrangement between the Dutch battle group and the Iraqis. Support for the authorities – the core of the Dutch military mission – had become more complex. Due to the ending of the occupation and the start of Iraqi self-governance, 4 NLBG had far less insight into and control over political and administrative developments than its predecessors. Moreover, the dismantling of the CPA building-cum-CIMIC centre in As Samawah meant the loss of the physical Dutch (military) presence as a major hub in civil-military relations between the provincial administration, the CIMIC team, the political adviser, the FLT, the police mentor and, last but not least, the local population, who often came up to the gate with specific requests or information. The influence of the Dutch political adviser, who had been the spider in the politico-administrative web during the first seven months of the operation, dwindled. Michel Rentenaar’s successor Robbert van Lanschot still had his office next to that of provincial CPA head Soriano until
the end of June, but no longer served as his adviser due to the appointment of a separate American CPA ‘Polad’. The executive role of the Dutch political adviser in the administrative build-up task had therefore ceased.

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

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

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

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

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

The shortcomings in Iraqi security structures had on the other hand been identified several times by anyone dealing with them, such as the personnel at the Provincial Joint Coordination Center91 and Dutch police mentors Colonel Veltman and his successor Lieutenant Colonel Hans
The latter reported in early August that he noticed at his first meeting of the Provincial Security Committee that the heads of the Al Muthanna security organisations did not make policy and instead only discussed incidents. They blocked solutions for structural shortcomings by constantly citing their financial and material problems and their shortages in personnel. Although these certainly existed, the cause was at least to a degree also poor planning on the part of the security organisation’s management itself, resulting in relatively high numbers of personnel being used for static security tasks at police stations, permanent roadblocks and government buildings. The police and National Guard conducted too few vehicle and foot patrols.

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

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

2 and 3 NLBG had frequently pressed for the dismissal of the provincial Chief of Police, Kareem, as the Dutch had plenty of evidence of corruption on his part. The former soldier, with a Republican Guard past under Saddam Hussein, was known systematically to cream off funds destined for his organisation for his own personal use and that of his tribe. Since December 2003, Kareem had formally been interim provincial police chief. He landed the job after his boss had lost a power struggle with
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governor Al Hassani. The Dutch suspected that his appointment arose from an agreement to split power between the influential Al Zayadi tribe (to which Kareem belonged) and Hassani’s own clan, the Albu Hassan. An attempt in March 2004 by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior to dismiss Kareem was blocked by Hassani with the argument that the Lieutenant Colonel was only interim and that formally therefore there already was a vacancy. After the transfer of sovereignty at the end of June, Hassani’s position had become unassailable and his conduct exceedingly elusive. None of the Dutch officials could exercise any influence any longer to have Kareem removed.

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

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

In order to turn the tide, 4 NLBG set itself a number of targets with respect to SSR. Firstly, the Dutch unit resumed mentoring and monitoring of the security services, as well as conducting joint patrols and improving infrastructure, such as police stations, checkpoints and prisons. There was steady progress on training the National Guard too, the objective being to bring its battalion up to proper strength. There were also efforts to equip the Guard better. However, there was no short-term solution to problems such as the desperate shortage of accommodation and high-quality vehicles, and these persisted for many months. In October, the National Guard battalion was reinforced with two hundred new recruits. In November, a second round of recruit training started, resulting in the
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unit being fully staffed a short time later.\textsuperscript{100} The Guard soldiers were also given heavier weapons, such as machine guns and RPGs.\textsuperscript{101} The border police, another understaffed organisation, had to wait longer for its expansion but, here too, efforts by 4 NLBG led to permission from Baghdad to recruit hundreds of new personnel. Via their CIMIC funds, the Dutch also facilitated the construction of additional border posts.\textsuperscript{102}

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

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

The Dutch commander therefore preferred to connect his efforts to a national Iraqi ‘Quality Improvement Plan’ for the police and use this programme to identify and replace “unsuitable IP personnel” top-down.\textsuperscript{106} To this end, in September the Dutch military police started to “map out” all personnel in the police force in Ar Rumaythah in order to prepare recommendations for “possible replacement procedures”.\textsuperscript{107} Although Matthijssen thought that something needed to be done in the short term,
this strategy meant that he was dependent on higher echelons and it therefore took time. As he reported to The Hague, he was told that the Iraqi authorities’ improvement programme had been delayed and would not kick off in the southern provinces until November. This was a set-back for the commander, as he estimated that the actual dismissal of policemen could then commence only after the general elections in January 2005. The Iraqi government and its American sponsor apparently wanted at all costs to keep the police force at full strength in order for the country’s first democratic elections to be a success.108

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

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

In Operation Buzzard, which started on 10 October, a multinational detachment of Dutch, British, US and Italian troops set up a Forward Operating Base near the border with Saudi-Arabia and the neighbouring province of Najaf. The FOB served as a command post and logistics and medical support facility, including two US Blackhawk helicopters for medevac. The base was used for operations along the border lasting a week, in which Dutch platoons took on the southern section in Al Muthanna and British Marines the area to the north, in what was officially Najaf territory. The allied troops conducted joint patrols with the Iraqi border police and manned temporary checkpoints, stopping and searching vehicles.112 At the same time, the international forces visited the permanent border posts in order to set up
communications by installing HF radios at the posts and in vehicles. Signals specialists taught the Iraqis how to use the new equipment. The operation was mainly aimed at the future expansion of the border police by four to six hundred men and at constructing eight more permanent strongpoints.4

4 NLBG thus completed its tour with an emphasis on SSR. The direct support and coaching gave the Iraqi security services a new sense of self-confidence, after morale had plummeted in the wake of the violence of the Sadr rebellion. In Ar Rumaythah, too, Bravo Company again tentatively started to support the police and the National Guard. The transition from the PJCC to PJOC was supported with discussions on objectives and methods of the future command post, and with exercises using scale models. The infrastructural changes for the PJOC were completed at the end of October, a major milestone. In his final report on 14 November, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen looked back with satisfaction on the SSR tasks, which he viewed as the “focus” of his operation. He emphasised the “modus operandi” of the Dutch, “with respect for the culture and people”, which in his view led to the battle group’s initiatives having been easily accepted by the Iraqis.5

The fifth contingent

The next Dutch contingent in Al Muthanna, 5 NLBG, took over responsibility for the province from 4 NLBG on 15 November 2004. The new battle group was built up around 11 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (Grenadiers and Rifles Guards Regiment) from Schaarsbergen, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frits van Dooren. His battalion task group had the same air assault background as 4 NLBG and operated using more or less the same structure, with the Staff and Heavy Weapons Company and Alpha Company in As Samawah, Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah and Charlie Company in Al Khidr. One difference was that the last unit was originally a mechanised infantry unit from 17 Armoured Infantry Battalion (Prinses Irene Fuselier Guards Regiment). Infantry platoons from 11 Battalion’s own third company were spread across all units, as were two additional platoons from the ranks of sister unit 12 Infantry Battalion.6 In addition to normal framework operations relating to security in the province, the new contingent’s focal points were the impending general election in January 2005 and the completion of as many CIMIC and SSR projects as possible.7

During his first day as NLBG commander, Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren noted that the Dutch area of operations was still “significantly quieter” than other parts of Iraq, where tensions were in fact rising due
to the US offensive against the rebel stronghold of Fallujah that month. The Iraqi government had even declared a national state of emergency as a result of this crisis. Initial preparations for the ballots in January were also causing more violence elsewhere. The Dutch battle group commander cemented his wish to preserve the peace in his sector by intensifying contacts with the local population – in particular in the larger towns of As Samawah and Ar Rumaythah – and increasing the number of foot patrols and social patrols. His troops’ basic attitude towards the Iraqis should be one of “correct and respectful” conduct.117

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

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

With this deadline looming, the amount of work to be done increased. In the autumn of 2004, in the wake of the incidents of August, not only the Netherlands provided extra SSR funds for building up the Al Muthanna security services in the short term. MND South-East also provided an additional 1.8 million US dollars for renovating or rebuilding twelve police stations. The Japanese aid battalion took it upon itself to fit out the stations and provide them with furniture.121
In the last few months of 2004, it also became clear that the National Guard in Al Muthanna was to be expanded by adding a battalion and a brigade staff. It was a remarkably ambitious step in a province where until that point the only battalion had been understaffed, still did not function properly and in fact comprised separately-operating infantry companies. The new brigade commander arrived on 13 December. His task was to oversee and direct the expansion process along with a number of staff officers. Due to the lack of elementary infrastructure, 5 NLBG offered the Iraqi Guardsmen temporary accommodation at Camp Smitty. The officers were also given workspace. Like all National Guard units, the two-battalion brigade would eventually be incorporated into the new regular Iraqi army.

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

**The run-up to elections**

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

On the evening of 19 November 2004, in a ‘problem area’ of As Samawah, a man threw a hand grenade at the last vehicle in a Dutch
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patrol. There were no injuries.\textsuperscript{126} A few days later, in the early evening of 24 November, unknown assailants near As Samawah fired a projectile which passed close to Camp Smitty. It was unclear whether the target was the Dutch or nearby Japanese camp or the town itself. In line with standard operating procedures, military personnel took shelter in the bunkers and infantry troops left the camp by the light of flares. Their search led to the arrest of two armed men in a car, who were handed over to the Iraqi police. It later turned out that two flares fired by the battle group had damaged homes in the town. With a view to keeping on good terms with the locals, 5 NLBG paid compensation for this unintended collateral damage.\textsuperscript{127}

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

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

The absence of attacks or other trouble meant that the last Dutch contingent’s operations quickly became dominated by the run-up to the national elections in January.\textsuperscript{130} Preparations for the big day had been going on for a couple of months by this point. The provincial delegation from the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) arrived at the end of October 2004. This organisation’s first act was to register the electorate in November and December. With some help from the NLBG’s CIMIC section, the IECI set up seventeen registration offices throughout the province, where heads of families could register the names of all potential
voters in their households. Political parties and individual candidates for public offices could also register here. In contrast to elsewhere in Iraq, this process was conducted peacefully and in an orderly fashion.

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

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

Once the ieci had decided on the locations for the 152 polling stations at the end of December, staff officers from the Iraqi National Guard reconnoitred these locations in order to draw up a comprehensive provincial security plan. 5 NLBG conducted its own inventory in order to
monitor this planning process. The IECI recruited about four thousand volunteers to staff the polling stations, the senior members of which were given training organised by the UN in Jordan. The first visible signs that the election campaign had kicked off were around New Year, when banners containing political slogans started to appear all around the towns. It was doubtful, however, whether these would be effective. It was generally assumed that the electorate’s votes would not be won over by conviction but could be obtained financially from tribal leaders. “Representatives of various parties” informed the Dutch political adviser Steeghs that negotiations were underway “with the leaders of certain crucial tribes” and that some deals had even already been made.140

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

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

A carnival-like atmosphere

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

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

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

The election day itself, Sunday 30 January, passed without incident. According to Lieutenant Colonel Van Dooren there was a “carnival-like atmosphere.” There were lots of people on the streets, who were excited and in high spirits. The NLBG commander was very impressed by the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces, which were out in force on this “day of truth”.\textsuperscript{150} As reported by political adviser Steeghs, who had criss-crossed the province that day and witnessed “a festive spirit” everywhere,
as well as a high turnout, security was very tight, “intense” even. At the polling stations, the diplomat had encountered “a kind of village square atmosphere: many people hung around after voting to talk and smoke together”. The electoral process seemed to have been conducted properly and fairly. Other than a few minor “technical” problems, there had been no intentional manipulation or electoral fraud. The ieci drew up result charts from the contents of the ballot boxes, which they then sent to Baghdad. The official results would be announced in two weeks.  

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

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

All in all, the 41-seat Governate Council showed a fragmented political playing field. It offered plenty of opportunity for forming coalitions, which meant that the process of electing the council chair and a new governor was anything but clear-cut. To complicate matters, two new candidates put themselves forward for the post of governor in addition to the three already announced. Karim Abid Sajed of Fadhila and Ahmed Marzuk of Dawa were now also running for office.  

This was not necessarily because
they thought they stood a good chance, but rather because they hoped to be able to ask a higher price of the more likely candidates, such as current governor Al Hassani, during the coalition negotiations.

**Reconstruction or force protection?**

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

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

CIMIC efforts in Iraq may not have entirely matched the definition of reconstruction, with its long-term implications, but it was clear that there was more than just force protection involved. In fact, the twenty-month CIMIC efforts in Al Muthanna were impressive. As with SSR, the Dutch involvement in CIMIC in Iraq was on a scale never seen before in Dutch international military operations. Exact data were unavailable, but between July 2003 and March 2005 the NLBGs completed between 600 and 1,000 projects. To do so, the Dutch forces spent over 16 million US dollars from Dutch and allied funds, of which the Dutch share can be exactly ascertained: about 2.7 million US dollars in CIMIC funds and over 1.8 million US dollars from the so-called Peace Fund (later called Stability Fund). In meeting the ‘reconstruction demand’, a further 100 million or so in ‘long
dollars’ for CPA project proposals (in particular from 2 NLBG) were added, as well as the (non-financial) contribution of the battle group – whether or not included under CIMIC – to institutional reconstruction projects such as administrative reforms and the elections.

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

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

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