

Iraq: Italian Lessons Learned

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CLASHES DURING the spring of 2004 put 3,000 Italian officers and soldiers to a hard test in Dhi Qhar Province in southern Iraq during Operation Antica Babilonia. The most important battles occurred in Nasiriyah near three bridges on the Euphrates River. The enemy was 600 Shiite irregulars, most of whom were members of the paramilitary Mahdi Army led by firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.¹

The Mahdi Army was equipped with AK-47 rifles, Dragunov precision rifles, 60-millimeter (mm) mortars, machineguns, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers and a large stock of ammunition. According to U.S. sources, Al-Sadr could count on approximately 10,000 combatants with a hard core of 3,000 militiamen.²

Between 800 and 1,200 Sadrists received military training in three camps in southern Iran. Members of Iranian secret services infiltrated Iraq by opening 18 “foundations of charity,” officially for works of beneficence, but in reality, active centers of recruitment.³ Although Iran initially favored the Anglo-American military intervention in Iraq (witness the case of Amhad Chalabi), it nonetheless prepared a strategy to create a post-Saddam Iraq favorable to its national interests.

The First Battle of Nasiriyah

A climate of tension preceded the first battle of Nasiriyah that limited normal operations by Italian units. On 5 April 2004, the Sadrists (led by the young sheik Aws al-Khafaji) seized unguarded bridges with an unopposed, surprise attack, entrenched themselves, constructed improvised barricades, and created several fire centers inside buildings and on rooftops.

As the revolt spread, British command gave the order to free the bridges and restore free movement to and from the city. The Italian Government then gave the green light for Operation Porta Pia to help free the bridges. The operation involved three companies from the 11th Bersaglieri Regiment, a marine company from the San Marco Regiment, a cavalry squadron from the Savoia Regiment, elements of the Carabinieri GIS (Special Interventions Group), and parachutists from the Tuscania Regiment. In all,

the military force included about 600 solidiers.

A mechanized column of 60 vehicles of several types and 8 Centauro armored reconnaissance vehicles (the contingent’s heaviest armored vehicle) began to move at 0300 and arrived in the southern zone of Nasiriyah at 0600. Once the column arrived in sight of the Euphrates River, the Sadrists began an intense barrage of light arms and RPG fire. At least 400 RPGs were fired during the battle. The irregular army also fired several mortar rounds from the north side of the river. The Italians replied by firing all their weapons, including the Centauro’s 105-mm cannons, destroying a building used by Iraqi snipers.

After clashing with a group of 40 insurgents, 90 San Marco marines in two mechanized and motorized platoons retook the first bridge to the east and established themselves on the opposite side of the Euphrates. With his force under constant fire, the San Marco Regiment marine commander asked for and received reinforcements—six sharpshooters mounted on a VM-90P soft-skinned vehicle. Two RPGs hit the VM-90P as it crossed the bridge. One did not explode, but the other did, wounding three soldiers.

The fight for the second bridge was more difficult. An advancing Bersaglieri platoon, which was receiving strong resistance from tactically well-positioned Sadrists, needed reinforcement to maintain its position on the north side of the bridge. During this clash, Mahdi Army RPGs hit two VCCs (an Italian version of the M-113 light-tracked armored fighting vehicle), but in at least one case, the grenade did not explode.

Poor military preparation and maintenance was probably the main reason for the Mahdi Army’s relatively ineffective use of RPGs. The Sadrists often fired their RPG launchers from too short of a distance, which they did not have enough time to properly arm the grenades. Had all the grenades detonated during their attacks, Italian losses would have been quite serious.

While Italian forces marched toward the third and last bridge, the enemy constantly received reinforcements and ammunition and even used city hospital ambulances for transportation. As the firefight grew

in intensity, the Italians employed the Panzerfaust antitank weapon (with 15 rockets) and the Milan Antitank Guided Missile System (with 4 missiles) to neutralize Mahdi Army positions, which were particularly strong near the third bridge.

Because the bridge had a “mule-back” structure, some Italian marine riflemen climbed to the top of a parapet and looked through binoculars to view actions on the other side of the river, where insurgent militiamen intermingled with the women and children of Nasiriyah. Because they did not have any less-than-lethal armaments, Italian forces could not hope to separate the Mahdi rebels from the women and children. To avoid slaughtering innocent noncombatants, the Italians did not attack.

The Italians did not have reconnaissance aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) at their disposal, and their AB-412 and HH-3F helicopters were vulnerable when flying over urbanized areas held by hostile infantry. Therefore, San Marco Regiment marines were exposed to lethal fire when trying to obtain situational awareness. Not having aerial support was penalizing: aircraft could have engaged enemy emplacements on rooftops and destroyed mortars and insurgent vans from the sky, giving the Mahdist leadership something else to think about.

The battle lasted until noon when the belligerents declared a truce to conduct negotiations. At 1500, the opposing forces agreed the south side of the bridge would remain in Italian hands, and Iraqi policemen would patrol the north side. Another hour of gunfire accompanied the Italian disengagement. At the end of the day, Italian soldiers had expended 30,000 rounds of ammunition, and it had been necessary to resupply the troops 5 times during the day. The official casualties were 15 Italian and 15 Sadrists killed in action, but the Iraqi death toll might have been as high as 150 or 200.

The Second Battle of Nasiriyah

In May, about 300 Mahdi Army irregulars launched a new offensive, and this time they were better armed, having portable ground-to-air SA-7 missiles and, perhaps, more powerful mortars. The Mahdi Army’s organization and military preparation seemed improved: they operated in several assault groups of from 20 to 30 militiamen, each led by 2 well-trained commanders (called “the chosen”), with communications assured by a system of couriers and luminous signals. The accuracy of the Mahdi Army’s mortar fire was also improved, probably because the Army now used informants and observers. Nevertheless, the overall military performance of the Sadrists was poor and not even remotely comparable to the performance of seasoned guerrilla organizations such as the Chechen separatists or the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka.

Aside from the bridges, the Mahdists’ main objectives were the sandbagged Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) building and the Libeccio base (a former museum, now a police station, on a road of strategic importance). The Mahdi Army, which began its attack after Friday prayers, soon gained the upper hand against only token resistance by local police and quickly occupied the bridges and major intersections.

In the early afternoon, 40 insurgents stormed Libeccio base, but two platoons of Italian Carabinieri and one Romanian contingent arrived to dislodge them. The Mahdists attacked the CPA building, which was defended by 1 platoon of Italian marines with a few VM-90P and VCCs; 32 private security guards from the Philippines, armed with AKM automatic rifles; and 6 American private security guards. Approximately 150 Mahdi Army Shiites laid siege to the CPA building with guns, mortars, and rockets, but they did not seem to be particularly anxious “to kick in the door.” Instead, they preferred to magnetize a nucleus of Italians (who had become semi-trapped while conducting a sortie) and entice Italian reinforcements to traverse narrow city streets transformed into dangerous tunnels of steel and fire. Italian aid columns, with the Centauro in good evidence, became targets of the aggressive Mahdists.⁴

The CPA building’s symbolic value was greater for the Italians than for the militiamen, who preferred trying to kill and wound as many Italian soldiers as possible instead of risking heavy casualties for the mere possession of a waving flag. Italian governor Barbara Contini, who at the beginning of the clashes was outside Nasiriyah, chose to return in the besieged CPA complex and immediately became a new target for the guerrillas and a new worry for the defenders.

On the night of 15 May 2004, six VCC-1s left the main Italian military base (called “White Horse”) to shore up the CPA building’s defenses. The Sadrists ambushed the mechanized formation several times, and an RPG that did not detonate hit an armored troop carrier. But, the Italian force arrived to reinforce the building and evacuate the journalists and most civilian employees trapped inside.

On the morning of 16 May, 50 infantrymen and cavalrymen from the Lagunari Regiment and the Savoia Squadron launched an assault against fortified enemy emplacements and mortars. The Italian force advanced through the narrow streets of Nasiriyah with eight troop carriers, four Centauros, and an anti-barricades tank (a Leopard tank without gun but equipped with a steel spade). The wheeled Centauro encountered several difficulties in moving alone through improvised barricades and other obstacles.

The Italians fired five or six Milan missiles to neutralize four enemy positions, but a deluge of fire stopped their advance. One Centauro had two ripped wheels, and eight Mahdi RPGs (luckily loaded with antipersonnel instead of antitank explosives) hit two VCCs armored carriers. After a fierce, 6-hour firefight, the Italian armored column retreated. Had it been properly equipped with tanks and armed helicopters, it could have accomplished its mission.

In the meantime, the Mahdi Army intensified pressure on Libeccio base, which was defended by a platoon from the Lagunari Regiment that had replaced a Romanian unit. A 60-mm mortar bomb killed an Italian soldier and wounded two others. Under constant fire by 100 militiamen, Carabinieri parachutists and Portuguese gendarmes arrived at Libeccio base in a column of 16 military vehicles and 2 Centauros to facilitate evacuation.

As night fell, the Italian units began a series of “aimed operations” to eliminate the mortar threat once and for all. An American AC-130 gunship bombarded a mortar position, two car vans transporting mortars, and a bus full of insurgents, while Italian parachutists conducted mopping-up operations in great style.

In the late evening, General Gian Marco Chiarini, head of the Italian joint task force in Iraq, reached an agreement with the Sadrist for a cease-fire, but a dissident Shiite armed faction violated it and became the target of the night’s final action.⁵ On the morning of 17 May, the Italian Army restored calm in Nasiriyah. Italian casualties had been low (1 dead and 15 wounded); the final toll for the Mahdists was unknown.

Allowing Sadr’s militia to safely retreat from Nasiriyah did not exactly reduce the threat to Italian troops. In counterinsurgency operations, the main difficulty is to identify with certainty who the enemy is, and mistakes in the field increase support for the rebels. But, when the guerrillas tried to occupy territory, the Italian Army had to rise to the occasion and neutralize them definitively. To do so, the Italian contingent had to possess sufficient military resources to isolate the battlefield; prevent the enemy from refueling, limit his ability to exfiltrate and maneuver; and force him to spend his resources, contrasting isolation and attack actions.

While Italian units faced many difficulties in the battles of Nasiriyah, one should not forget that the Americans, who are sometimes much too ready to



An Italian Army soldier from the 151st Regiment, Sardinia, Italy, stations himself on the roof of the CPA-Dhi Qar building during the meeting of Coalition Provisional Authority Administrator, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer with the then commander of the Italian joint task force in Iraq, Brigadier General Bruno Stano, the Governor of Nasiriyah and other Iraqi, British, Portuguese, and Romanian officials, 10 January 2004.

criticize their allies, also encountered great difficulties during counterinsurgency operations in built-up areas and had to agree to debatable unofficial cease-fires in Najaf, Kufa, and Falluja.⁶ The Sadrists have often used such pauses to resupply and disengage themselves, recruit new volunteers, and attack elsewhere. So, it is no surprise to read that “U.S. units accustomed to the disorganized, hit-and-run strikes of insurgents in Baghdad and elsewhere were impressed to see the black-clad fighters of the Mahdi Army moving in coordinated units [and firing rifles as] cover for the launch of rocket-propelled grenades, the weapon that has been most damaging to U.S. forces in Iraq.”⁷

Lessons Learned

Several lessons learned emerge from a first analysis of the violent events at Nasiriyah.⁸ Italy must spend more resources to adequately prepare and equip Italian soldiers to fight in urbanized areas and buy tactical UAVs and more observation devices to help identify the enemy. Italian forces also need more heavy weapons (tanks, combat helicopters, and self-propelled artillery) at the inception of military operations.⁹

Reducing firepower does not help the peace process: the problem is *how* force is used, not its possession. Bringing heavy weapons into a foreign country does not necessarily mean military escalation, although this is a widely accepted view in Italy. Italian forces could place heavy weapons in hangars and depots and keep them well-oiled and ready to use.

Western armies, including the U.S. Army, have neglected the lessons Israel learned during the

Lebanese war in 1982. Israeli infantry preferred to move on foot to avoid crossing battlefields in M-113s, which were easy prey for Palestinian RPGs. Israel substantially modified some of its tanks so they could survive modern antitank threats, created the heavily armored Achzarit and Nakpadon; and introduced a low-intensity-conflict version of the Merkava tank specially fitted for urban warfare.

Italy should develop or buy cheap, sturdy, well-armored, subsonic counterinsurgency aircraft that can pinpoint ground targets and arm them with machineguns, rockets, or new precision bombs (such as the American-made small-diameter bomb) to limit collateral damage in an urban setting. Such slow-moving aircraft with this short turning radius (to facilitate visual targeting) could loiter for a long time over a battlefield and conduct deadly "air-sniping" missions.

Italy's armed forces should also revise their doctrine for psychological, humanitarian, and civil-military operations. Such operations are surely important, but they are not enough to stabilize a turbulent country, and thinking that we can win wars by saturating insurgent zones with leaflets and chocolate bars is unrealistic and pernicious.

Revising current standard operating procedures in case of ambush is also necessary. Several times, groups of 10 to 15 Mahdi Army insurgents armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and RPGs ambushed Italian patrols mounted on soft-skinned vehicles. The Italians opened fire with all weapons and exited from the killing zone at maximum speed, but, unfortunately, these actions made it easy for the enemy to retreat without suffering casualties.



The chassis of the Achzarit infantry armored vehicle is built from Russian T-54/T-55 tanks captured in significant numbers by the Israel Defence Force. The chassis is completely rebuilt, with the 10-man crew and infantry compartment at the front and the new power pack at the rear. An additional layer of Israeli-developed passive armor is mounted on the chassis and the Achzarit has a combat loaded weight of 44 tons compared to the 36 tons of a turreted T-54/T-55. Infantry can enter and leave via hatches in the roof or the hydraulically operated clamshell door located in the right side of the vehicle.

Increasing the firepower of Italian mobile patrols by routinely adding powerful vehicles such as Centauros and Dardo armored personnel carriers is also not a bad idea. The availability of night-vision devices would allow an Italian variant of the legendary Special Night Squads British officer Orde Wingate created in Palestine in the 1930s to defeat Arab irregulars.

Italy's armed forces should launch an information operations campaign to teach Italian politicians about the military instrument's potentialities and limits. Some Italian decisionmakers suffer a knowledge deficiency in military affairs. When the bullets fly, this is unacceptable. **MR**

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NOTES

1. The "mahdi" is the 12th imam (leader of the Muslim faith), who is said to have gone into hiding in the 9th century and who Shiites believe is still alive and will return at the Day of Judgment.
2. For an overview of the Sadrist uprising, see Jeffrey White and Ryan Phillips, "Sadrist revolt provides lessons for counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Jane's Intelligence Review* (August 2004): 22-28.
3. Michael A. Leeden, "The Iranian Hand," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 April 2004.
4. To obviate the effectiveness of similar tactics in the future, Italy should employ unmanned aircraft with a precision-refueling capability similar to unmanned aerial vehicles currently under development in the United States. John V. McCoy, "Unmanned Aerial Logistics Vehicles: A Concept Worth Pursuing," *Army Logistician* (March-April 2004): 40-44.
5. Maurizio Piccirilli, "C'è anche una faida tra le fazioni sciite" [There is also a feud between Shiite factions], *Il Tempo*, 19 May 2004.
6. See "U.S.: Some Coalition Partners' Priority Is Not Getting Killed," *The World Tribune*, 21 May 2004.
7. Quoted from Karl Vick, "Grim Showdown with al-Sadr in Valley of Peace," *Washington Post*, 11 August 2004.
8. For more information about the first battle of Nasiriyah, see "Le milizie sciite dichiarano guerra all'Italia" [Shiite militias declare war on Italy], *il Riformista*, 7 April 2004; "Chi dà i lancirazzetti e i satellitari ad Al Sadr?" [Who is providing rocket launchers and satellite cellphones to Al Sadr?], *il Riformista*, 20 April 2004; Daniele Mastrogiacomio, "Nassiriya: Abbiamo usato i cannoni" [Nasiriyah: We have used cannons], *La Repubblica*, 8 April 2004; "Ci sparavano addosso dalle case, un tiro al bersaglio" [They shot at us from the houses; it was a shooting gallery], *la Padania*, 8 April 2004; Mario Nese, "Ci colpivano con i razzi. Abbiamo sparato 30 mila colpi" [They hit us with rockets. We fired 30 thousand rounds], *Corriere della Sera*, 8 April 2004; Francesco Grignetti, "Sparavano come pazzi, è stato peggio che in Somalia" [They shot like madmen; it has been worse than in Somalia], *La Stampa*, 8 April 2004; Fausto Biloslavo, "Quel marò strappato ai

nemici come nei film," [That marine ripped off from the enemy as in the movies], *il Giornale*, 13 April 2004; *Comunicazioni del Ministro della Difesa, On.le Prof. Antonio Martino, alle Commissioni Difesa di Senato e Camera sui più recenti eventi della Missione Militare Nazionale in Iraq* [Honorable professor Antonio Martino, Italian Secretary of Defense, Communication to Parliament Defense Commissions regarding the final events of the National Military Task Force in Iraq], Roma, Senato, 7 April 2004; Fausto Biloslavo, "Ecco la vera storia della battaglia di Nasiriyah," [The true story of the battle of Nasiriyah], *il Giornale*, 15 April 2004; Lorenzo Cremonesi, "Barbara Contini, governatrice di Dhi Qar, nel fortino: Possiamo trattare" [Barbara Contini, Governor of Dhi Qar, from the redoubt we can negotiate], *Corriere della Sera*, 17 May 2004.

For information about the second battle of Nasiriyah, see Mario Nese, "el fortino di Nassiriya abbiamo saputo reagire" [From the Nasiriyah redoubt we know how to react], *Corriere della Sera*, 31 May 2004; Andrea Nicastro, "A Nassiriya assediati dagli sciiti" [In Nasiriyah besieged by the Shiites], *Corriere della Sera*, 16 May 2004; Meo Ponte, "La salvezza è a 13 chilometri" [Safety is 13 kilometers away], *La Repubblica*, 16 May 2004; Gian Micalessin, "Usati anche missili per snidare i ribelli" [We used rockets to dislodge rebels], *il Giornale*, 19 May 2004; Comunicazione del Ministro della Difesa, On. Prof. Antonio Martino, sull'evoluzione situazione in Iraq [Honorable professor Antonio Martino, Italian Secretary of Defense, communication regarding the evolution of the situation in Iraq], Roma, Senato, 18 May 2004; Meo Ponte, "Gli Italiani riprendono Nasiriyah" [Italians reconquer Nasiriyah], *la Repubblica*, 18 May 2004; Luca Poggiali, "Nuovi scontri a Nasiriyah" [New fights in Nasiriyah], *Raidi* (June 2004), 17-29.

9. During the summer, after a request by the local Italian commander, some Ariete tanks, Dardo armored personal carriers, and AAV-7A1-RAM/RS armored assault amphibious landing vehicles were sent to Iraq. During water operations, the AAV-7 carries troops through rough water and surf zones inland to objectives ashore. This vehicle can easily cross the Euphrates River to help counter future insurgent attempts to block Nasiriyah bridges.