

Introduction

Dutch military operations in Iraq, 2003-2005

In March and April 2003, a military coalition led by the United States and United Kingdom toppled the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the space of just three weeks. Soon afterwards, on 6 June 2003, the Dutch government decided to contribute a battalion of Marines plus support units to the allied stabilisation effort in the wake of the invasion. That summer, Dutch forces relieved US troops in the Southern Iraqi province of Al Muthanna. However, the Dutch government repeatedly stressed that its forces did not form part of the original allied occupation army. Their task was only to contribute to security and stability in the province in order to enable the economic and political reconstruction of Iraq.¹ In the Netherlands, the military deployment was given the name Stabilisation Force Iraq, abbreviated to SFIR.

The Dutch armed forces deployed five successive reinforced and self-supporting combat battalions (known as battle groups) to Southern Iraq on four-monthly rotations between July 2003 and March 2005. During the first two rotations, the roughly 1,200-strong tailor-made units consisted of Marine battalions, while the subsequent three were made up of Army (mechanised, air assault or mixed) infantry battalions. The Royal Netherlands Air Force supported the ground forces with Chinook, Cougar and Apache helicopters and Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (gendarmerie and military police) personnel played an important role in training new Iraqi security forces.

At the time, the Dutch military considered the deployment and operation in Iraq to be complicated and challenging. The SFIR mission clearly deviated from previous international ‘crisis response operations’,

the formal umbrella term under which the Netherlands had conducted peacekeeping, peace support or humanitarian operations since the end of the Cold War in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans. After all, the 2003 Iraq operation was set up in the wake of a controversial invasion, followed by an equally controversial occupation, which subsequently met with increasing armed resistance. 'SFIR' therefore was no standard peace operation in the sense that there was no peace agreement to uphold, and there were no warring parties to separate, disarm or control on behalf of a non-alligned international community.

Instead, the Dutch joined an ad hoc interventionist coalition. This raised the question, inside and outside the Dutch armed forces, what was actually entailed by such a deployment of a so-called 'stabilisation force' within the framework of the occupation of a country by a warfighting alliance rather than within the framework (and with the mandate) of the Netherlands' usual (and preferred) international structures like the United Nations (UN) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). What did this coalition force do to bring security to Iraq and in what respect was it or was it not an occupying force?

First the facts. Iraq, after the invasion in March and April 2003, was occupied by foreign troops, with a view to forming a new, democratic government for and by the Iraqis themselves. The regime of dictator Saddam Hussein had been removed. The US-UK civil occupation authority (Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA) and its multinational armed forces attempted to construct a new state. This ambitious project took place in a country that was at rock bottom due to years of war, destruction, international sanctions, disastrous economic policies, corruption and an internal reign of terror. Nevertheless, there was optimism and relief among many sections of the 'liberated' Iraqi population, which happily threw off the yoke of over forty years of totalitarian rule.

There were reasons for pessimism too, however. Parts of the old regime, previously organised into the all-powerful Baath (Renaissance) party, went underground and started a violent insurgency. They were joined by foreign fighters with anti-American intentions, ostensibly aided by (sympathisers from) neighbouring countries like Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Many other Iraqi nationalist or religious groups also took up arms. One tactic of these resistance movements was to cause disruption by inciting violence between the different groups within Iraqi society. Defeatists soon predicted the disintegration of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, with ultimately civil war between Kurdish, Arab Sunni

and Arab Shiite groups as the worst-case scenario. For the time being, however, the foreign occupying powers and their allies – such as the Netherlands – were trying to set the country on its way to a peaceful and democratic future.

Controversy in the Netherlands

At the end of 2002 and in early 2003, the majority of the Dutch population opposed a military contribution to the invasion of Iraq. Even the Dutch government's decision to back the war only politically, and not militarily, met with substantial resistance. The compromise, reached by the short-lived, so-called Balkenende I government (2002-2003), which had already resigned by early 2003 and operated in the shadows of a national election, was seen as a typical example of Dutch '*polder*' politics. It demonstrated how the political elite of a small country, when it comes to foreign policy, often has to come up with a compromise between public opinion, its own political reality (in this case an election campaign and the formation of a new government) and the desire to comply with the requirements and demands of an important and powerful ally.

Former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) expressed the rather populist opinion of many when he claimed that under the leadership of his successor, Jan Peter Balkenende of the Christian-Democrats (CDA), the Netherlands had apparently become the United States' lapdog. For many years after 2003 there was a debate about why the government in The Hague had seemed so eager to please its powerful partner in Washington in this thorny matter.² Was there some truth in the public perception that Dutch political support for the invasion of Iraq was related to the appointment, later in 2003, of Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (CDA) to the post of Secretary-General of NATO? Did Dutch support raise the stature of the Netherlands in international US-dominated fora or were trade interests perhaps involved, as in the case of Britain's oil companies,³ and did support bring with it the promise of profitable contracts for Dutch businesses? Or was it simply a matter of (dogmatic) 'Atlantic solidarity' with the US and UK allies? The decision to back the war in Iraq remained a national conundrum for years to come.

In spite of the broad opposition to the invasion, national (media) attention and public appreciation for the Dutch troops in Iraq was almost exclusively positive. This is remarkable, given the fact that opinion polls regularly showed that the deployment in Iraq itself was consistently valued

less highly than other Dutch overseas crisis response operations in the past. With only 38 per cent in agreement with the deployment, 41 per cent against and 21 per cent without an opinion, the operation was arguably more controversial than the war waged against Indonesian nationalist forces during the decolonisation struggle in the former Dutch East Indies in the late 1940s. The operation in Iraq was even more unpopular than the failed Dutch UN-deployment in the Bosnian enclave of Srebrenica in 1994-1995, which – like the military operations in the former Asian colony – had occasionally been the subject of heated public debate, partly due to its dramatic ending.⁴ The operation in Iraq thus stood out in a very negative sense, irrespective of the appreciation for individual military personnel.

A Dutch success story?

What explains the positive appraisal of the Dutch troops on the ground in Iraq? The national media devoted a great deal of attention to SFIR, perhaps even more than to previous overseas operations, and in spite of the controversial circumstances the general tone was positive. Dutch forces at the same time presented a positive image abroad. Australian Prime Minister John Howard, for instance, tried to reassure his fellow countrymen when Australian troops took over responsibility for Al Muthanna province in the spring of 2005 by referring to the Dutch who had preceded them. He emphasised their supposedly successful operations, which had been internationally praised after an article appeared in the *New York Times* on 24 October 2004. According to the paper, the Dutch had been open and friendly towards the Iraqi people, preferring to drive around in open vehicles rather than in armoured cars. The article quoted an inhabitant of the provincial capital As Samawah, who said that the Dutch had shown respect, much more than the Americans. The head of police confirmed this view by saying that the Dutch had made a real effort to understand local traditions. He added that Iraqis viewed the Americans but not the Dutch as an occupying force.⁵

The article defined what the Dutch themselves had started to call the ‘Dutch approach’: a military presence that is friendly but robust when and where necessary, with good intentions and empathy for local customs and habits. An interesting and attractive viewpoint, but the ultimate question was of course whether the relative peace in Al Muthanna province during the years 2003-2005 could indeed be ascribed to this supposedly positive and effective ‘typically Dutch’ operational style, if in fact such a thing

existed at all. Or were the positive memories which the Netherlands came to cherish about this SFIR operation mainly due to the canny choice for the safest area of deployment which Iraq had to offer? Al Muthanna was hardly a hotbed of the emerging insurgency. “The Dutch selected this area because it is peaceful,” one inhabitant of Al Muthanna insisted in December 2003. “It will remain peaceful after the Dutch have left.”⁶

The nature of SFIR

So what was the true nature of SFIR, a mission that the Dutch government primarily defined in terms of what it was *not*? As far as the responsible Balkenende I (2002-2003) and Balkenende II (2003-2006) governments were concerned, the idea that the Iraqis saw the Americans and British but not their Dutch allies as occupiers served as the foundation for the Netherlands’ participation in the occupation of Iraq. The Dutch politicians viewed the US and UK as sole occupying powers, with all the responsibilities that role entailed, while the Dutch pretended to contribute to a supposedly separate multinational peace operation. In the spring of 2003, a reassuring, fashionable term began to be used in official communications on the deployment to Iraq. The Netherlands was contributing to a ‘stabilisation force’, without it being clear exactly what this meant.

The phrase ‘stabilisation force’ was just as undefined as other official umbrella terms like ‘crisis response operation’. One could make it fit anything. When combined with the abbreviation SFIR – only used by the Dutch – it particularly harked back to the Stabilisation Force in Bosnia (SFOR), the NATO operation in which the Netherlands participated intensively from 1996 to 2004. SFOR served to keep conflicting parties apart using a robust display of military power. The force created a kind of safety cordon within which civilian actors, such as (international) governmental and non-governmental organisations, could work on reconstructing the country torn apart by war. Aspects such as public administration, police tasks and reconstruction were expressly not part of the military tasks of SFOR in Bosnia. On paper, the 2003 Dutch SFIR operation in Iraq was defined in similar terms, although there was a completely different international, political and military framework within which it was conducted.⁷

In official documents on the Iraq operation, the Dutch Ministry of Defence never used the term ‘peace operation’. Yet in the country’s collective memory the mission became a deployment to be viewed in the tradition of Dutch contributions to international peace support missions,

and not, for example, in the tradition of the Dutch armed forces' experiences in occupations, in imposing military rule, or in counter-insurgency and other types of irregular warfare (from the colonial past in particular). Did this mean that the Netherlands no longer saw any difference between occupation and peacekeeping? Had it become so popular to suppose that the Dutch armed forces were only deployed overseas out of a sense of altruism, that each deployment abroad, including Iraq, was automatically earmarked as a peace operation? Or did the media and public see through this fabricated narrative and was this the reason the operation was so unpopular?

In general, the extent to which operations by Dutch troops in Iraq tallied with the political message, or not was rarely accounted for or debated. As could be expected, an altogether different situation developed on the Iraqi battlefield. As a result, the military were increasingly torn between the reality of an occupation and their political mandate. In other words: the emphatic political wish not to be seen as an occupying force while participating in an occupation, and in doing so claiming a status different from that of the Americans and the British (and other allies), seemed operationally untenable.

Could military personnel therefore implement the political mandate in practice? What was the Dutch contribution to the multinational deployment in Iraq between 2003 and 2005, and under what conditions did Dutch forces conduct their tasks? What was the so-called 'mission design'? How did the Dutch contribution to the occupation of Iraq come into being both politically and operationally and which aspects typified this mission (and the preparations for it) in the field? What was the state of the operational environment of Al Muthanna as encountered by the various Dutch SFIR contingents (NLBGS), how did they operate in this battle space and in what condition was the province when they left?

A gentle occupation?

This book examines the operations of the Dutch battle groups deployed in Iraq between July 2003 and April 2005. Using mainly information from military archives (some of it classified) and from interviews with military personnel, it focuses primarily on the tactical level. Operations are described within the international and domestic politico-strategic climate of the time. In the course of this, the abovementioned themes are elaborated with a view to classifying the mission and critically analysing the supposed causal link between the so-called 'Dutch approach' and the relative stability in the

appointed area of operations. To this end, this study dissects all aspects of SFIR, while the themes of its chapters reflect the shifting emphasis over time.

Chapter 1 introduces the 2003 war against the Baath regime from an international perspective and shows how the Dutch government arrived at the decision to support the invasion politically in the period between 2002 and 2003. It subsequently analyses how the decision to deploy SFIR was made. In what way did the government present the military operation and how did it translate the difference between ‘occupier’ and ‘non-occupier’ in the military assignment? Chapter 2 deals with the first few months of the operation, during which the gap between the formal assignment – with all its limitations – and the unwieldy and rapidly evolving reality on the ground was revealed. How did the NLBG operate as part of the international force and how did the unit cope with the mandate and enforced restrictions, such as the ban on executive police tasks?

Chapter 3 discusses a similar friction between theory and practice, resulting from the caveat that prohibited the undertaking of any administrative tasks. What repercussions did this have on relations with the CPA (on all levels) and with the British divisional headquarters in Basra? What problems did the Dutch encounter and what emerged as the focal point of operations? Did they ever go as far as exercising any form of military government? These themes are elaborated on in Chapter 4, which emphasises the central role for the NLBG from the autumn of 2003: the resurrection and training of new Iraqi security organisations.

Chapter 5 focuses on the growing resistance to the Coalition Forces from the spring of 2004 onwards. How did the operational environment change as a result of the mounting insurgency and how did the NLBG and the Netherlands’ national Defence Staff respond to this development? The occupation of Iraq was officially coming to an end, but did this cause a shift towards a peace support-like stabilisation operation or was there a shift towards countering irregular warfare? Chapter 6 deals with civil-military cooperation and reconstruction activities by the Dutch in relation to the security issues and with the continued development of Iraqi security forces up to the crucial national elections of January 2005. Not long after this milestone, the Netherlands completed its military operation in Al Muthanna. Chapter 7 opens with the withdrawal of Dutch forces from Iraq and subsequently answers the book’s key questions: was there a typical Dutch approach to the mission that can explain the relative stability in Al Muthanna in 2003-2005 and how can Dutch operations in Iraq in this period be typified?