

# US launches major military offensive in “liberated” Iraq

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Two months after the fall of Baghdad, the American military has been forced to launch a major assault on an area to the northwest of the Iraqi capital in a desperate bid to suppress mounting resistance to the US occupation.

Ten American troops have been killed in Iraqi guerrilla attacks in and around Baghdad over the past 15 days alone, with dozens more wounded. As the military operations continued yesterday, the US administrator over Iraq, Paul Bremer, issued a proclamation outlawing any “gatherings, pronouncements or publications” that call for opposition to the US occupation or the return to power of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party.

Code-named “Peninsula Strike,” the US offensive launched June 9 involved over 4,000 troops, backed by helicopter gunships, jet fighters and patrol boats. A 30-mile-square area around the Tigris river towns of Thuluya and Balad has been cordoned off and raids have been conducted on numerous houses and buildings where Iraqi fighters were alleged to be hiding. According to the US military, 397 “suspects” have been detained and a large number of weapons seized.

Over the last 24 hours of the US offensive, at least 10 Iraqis have been killed, while 10 Americans were wounded. Iraqis shot down a helicopter gunship and a jet fighter was also brought down. Pentagon officials claimed the fighter crashed because of mechanical problems. Thuluya, a predominantly Sunni Muslim town considered a hotbed of resistance by the American military, is under curfew.

According to Iraqi sources cited in the western media, “Peninsula Strike” has been intense and brutal. Reuters filmed houses with their doors smashed in and ransacked by US troops as they searched for weapons. Women and children were driven out of their homes and handcuffed. The June 12 *New York Times* reported Iraqi allegations that US troops beat a suspected guerrilla to death with their rifles and prevented medical treatment from being

administered to another who was suffering a heart attack. The *Washington Post* reported accusations that US troops had beaten Iraqi suspects and that some of those detained were as young as 13.

There are indications that the US military believes former Ba’athist leaders may be active in the Tigris river towns, organizing loyalists to attack American forces. According to the *New York Times*, one detained Iraqi who was subsequently released claimed he was specifically interrogated about the whereabouts of one of Hussein’s main military commanders, Gen. Ali Hassan al-Majid. Also known as “Chemical Ali,” he is a cousin of Saddam Hussein who had previously been reported killed in Basra. Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the pro-US exile group, the Iraqi National Congress, alleged in New York on Tuesday that Saddam Hussein himself was in the area.

While the scale of “Peninsula Strike” may be a response to intelligence that senior Ba’ath leaders are in the area, the operation is part of a sweeping nationwide crackdown against both political and military opposition to the American occupation forces.

Over the past 10 days, US troops have launched two raids on offices of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIR), a leading anti-Hussein Shi’ite Muslim organization with links to the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran. At least 20 SCIR officials were detained in Baquda on charges they were behind an attack on US troops in the town. The raids are widely viewed as revenge for the SCIR declaration that it will boycott any interim Iraqi government authority that is appointed by the US. Paul Bremer, the US administrator, responded to SCIR’s opposition to US neo-colonial rule by denouncing Iran for “interfering” in Iraq’s affairs.

Since June 5, some 3,000 US troops from the Third Infantry Division have been deployed in Fallujah to suppress resistance among the quarter of a million residents of the largely Sunni Muslim city west of

Baghdad. One American was killed and five wounded in an attack the same day. After American massacres of Iraqi civilians in the city on April 28 and April 30, Fallujah has been, in the words of a US soldier, a “mini war-zone.” While during the day the city has been largely peaceful, at night resistance fighters have made regular attacks on the American troops. According to the US military, residents of the city have been employing simple but ingenious methods to assist the nighttime guerrilla operations. Different colored flares and light signals have been used to warn Iraqi fighters about the strength of approaching US units so they can attack the most vulnerable. The US occupation authority has placed the city under what amounts to martial law.

The US military will continue suffering casualties until the day it leaves Iraq. More than a decade of American aggression has produced a vast reservoir of anti-colonial feeling among Iraqis. Added to the devastation of the first Gulf War and the years of economic sanctions, the Iraqi people now face the humiliation of being taken over by a foreign power and the social disintegration of their country.

War and looting have destroyed most public infrastructure and industry. Large areas of the major cities still do not have regular electricity, adequate fuel supplies, running water or functioning sewerage. Crime is endemic. Unemployment, already over 50 percent before the invasion, has soared due to the disbanding of the Iraqi army and the shutdown of dozens of state-owned companies. Subsidies for farmers have been abolished by the US authority, slashing the price of a ton of grain from \$205 to just \$105.

The UN agency UNICEF is warning of a potential health disaster during the hottest months of the year, July and August. The collapse of sanitation has already caused at least 70 percent of Iraqi children to suffer at least one bout of diarrhea this year. Cases of dysentery and typhoid are being reported.

While the Bush administration and Bremer dismiss the resistance as acts of isolated elements loyal to Saddam Hussein or encouraged from outside Iraq, US troops legitimately see enemies everywhere in the country they were told they had “liberated.” There is almost nowhere in Iraq where they can safely walk without fear of being shot.

Asked to explain who he thought was behind an attack in Baghdad last month, an unnamed US officer told the *Los Angeles Times*: “We don’t know if they are old [Iraqi] army guys motivated because we slaughtered

thousands and thousands of them. It could be Ba’athists. It could be soldiers. It could be terrorists. We don’t know.”

A US soldier involved in “Peninsula Strike” told the Associated Press: “We’re just not taking any chances. My life’s in danger so I’m going to approach them (the Iraqis) as hostile. And until I’m proved otherwise, that’s the way I’m going to approach it.”

A military policeman now patrolling Fallujah told the *Washington Post*: “We’ve got to be on our toes all the time. Eyes open, scanning the buildings. It’s not tanks and infantry we’re fighting anymore. It’s something hidden.”

There are already references in the US press to demoralization among the US military. Since the fall of Baghdad in April, it has suffered on average one fatality a day together with many more wounded and is facing a counterinsurgency quagmire that could well end in a humiliating defeat and withdrawal.

One brigade of the Third Infantry Division, which was heavily involved in the assault of Baghdad, has been on deployment for nine straight months and is now being told it will kept in Iraq for at least several more months. Members of the brigade were not likely comforted by comparisons with World War II, when the same unit remained in the field for 531 consecutive days. One of the brigade’s officers told the *New York Times* that his troops “almost feel betrayed.”

Of the US Army’s 10 divisions, five are now involved in the occupation of Iraq or supporting it—some 180,000 troops.



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