Washington's war of terror in Iraq

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A series of sustained counterinsurgency operations by US troops has signaled a new stage in the US occupation of Iraq. Faced with escalating armed resistance and growing hostility from the Iraqi people, Washington has decided to use overwhelming force to suppress and terrorize the country's 24 million people.

A war that was waged under the pretense of destroying fictitious "weapons of mass destruction" is evolving into a classical colonial-style war of repression, the kind that has been waged with bloody results from the US campaign in the Philippines at the dawn of the twentieth century, to the French bloodbath in Algeria beginning in the 1950s, to the US war in Vietnam.

Six weeks after President Bush strutted across the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and proclaimed that major combat operations had ended and the military mission had been accomplished, American soldiers are being killed by Iraqis at the rate of one a day. Iraqi casualties over the same period have climbed to several hundred.

The latest American death, the shooting of a soldier patrolling Baghdad Tuesday, brings to 50 the number of occupation troops killed in attacks or accidents since Bush utilized the aircraft carrier for a photo opportunity.

Beyond the daily guerrilla attacks on US troops, there are a number of other telling indications of the mounting resistance to the occupation. Robert Fisk, the veteran Middle East reporter for the *Independent* in Britain, said US officials had told him that aircraft seeking to land at Baghdad airport come under fire from snipers hiding near the runway virtually every night.

Another barometer of the seething anger among Iraqis is a spate of prison uprisings that have left several Iraqis dead and scores wounded. Last Saturday, detainees throwing rocks and wielding metal bars attacked US military guards at the Abu Gharib prison west of Baghdad. US guards opened fire on the Iraqis, killing one and critically wounding several others. It was the third such incident in a week at the prison complex. Two days earlier, US troops shot two prisoners to death. American authorities claimed they were trying to escape.

The bulk of the violent clashes between US forces and the Iraqi population go unreported. Unless an American soldier is killed or seriously wounded, the US Central Command does not reveal the incident. Iraqi sources charge that US authorities have covered up clashes, including those in which US troops have been killed.

The real character of what Washington called the "liberation" of the Iraqi people has emerged: it is a brutal occupation, with daily killings, house-to-house searches and mass arrests.

Thousands of US troops backed by helicopter gun ships, fighter planes and tanks have stormed through cities and towns across Iraq over the past several days in what the military has dubbed "Operation Desert Scorpion."

Kicking off this offensive was "Operation Peninsula," an attack involving some 4,000 US troops, which claimed the lives of over 100 Iraqis. US forces rounded up over 400 Iraqi men, releasing all but 60 of them. Just as most of the detained suspects proved to be of no interest to American forces, so too the bulk of those killed were innocent victims of the onslaught.

In a separate action last Friday, US forces answered an ambush on a tank north of Baghdad with apparently indiscriminate retaliation, slaughtering a family of five shepherds working in their fields.

Early Sunday morning, 1,300 American soldiers sealed off the restive town of Fallujah, where occupation forces massacred at least 18 demonstrators in April. One of the senior commanders in charge of house-to-house raids there told the *Washington Post* that the US military's goal was "to go in with overwhelming force to squash everything before putting a soldier in harm's way."

Press reports described US soldiers kicking down doors, forcing men to the ground and handcuffing them while planting their boots on the Iraqis' necks. The soldiers taped shut the mouths and blindfolded those detained before taking them away for interrogation. Women and children, some as young as six, were also rousted from their homes in the pre-dawn hours, handcuffed and held for hours before being released.

The US occupation authorities, echoed by the US news media, claim that these operations are directed exclusively against "Ba'ath Party loyalists, terrorist organizations and criminal elements." In fact, most of those caught up in these sweeps are ordinary Iraqi civilians.

The media propaganda cannot conceal the fact that Iraqi resistance to the occupation runs far deeper than the remnants of the Ba'athist regime. While the bulk of the ambushes and shootings of US soldiers has been concentrated in the predominantly Sunni area in central Iraq that provided the strongest popular base for the Ba'athist regime, attacks and protests have also erupted in the largely Shi'ite south, a center of opposition to Saddam Hussein's rule.

Last Sunday, over 10,000 Iraqis marched through the center of the southern city of Basra, stoning British army vehicles and demanding an end to the occupation. A systematic sabotage campaign in the same region has prevented occupation officials from restarting Iraq's oil industry.

The latest sweeps, conducted in some cases against populations that were known as centers of opposition to Saddam Hussein, will only fuel more acts of resistance.

"Pentagon officials say the effort is needed to avoid a prolonged guerrilla campaign that not only could cost American lives, but would sap energy from a reconstruction effort already slowed by sabotage and security problems," the *Wall Street Journal*, a paper that has provided the strongest editorial support for Bush's war in Iraq, reported Tuesday. "Yet military planners acknowledge this approach is fraught with its own peril, as the incursions inevitably will alienate parts of the population and generate sympathy for those the US is trying to isolate."

The *Journal* noted that US troops "have a hard time distinguishing between ordinary civilians and enemy fighters." It added that while thus far failing to stop the attacks, the offensive and the resulting civilian casualties "have raised support for America's foes."

"You can't tell friend from foe," complained a US soldier, according to a wire service report. "We didn't want nothing to do with these people anymore," an Army Sergeant told the *New York Times*. He added that even children terrified him. "At the end, it was like, 'Get that kid away from me,'" he said.

These remarks are eerily reminiscent of those made by an earlier

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generation of American troops who were sent on the basis of lies to kill and be killed in a distant land—Vietnam. Fearing the population that they were supposedly protecting from "communist aggression," they found it impossible to distinguish Vietnamese civilians from the Viet Cong—largely because the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were waging a popular war against a hated and despised army of occupation.

As one US Marine Sergeant testified in hearings held in May 1971: "The way that we distinguished between civilians and VC, VC had weapons and civilians didn't and anybody that was dead was considered a VC. If you killed someone they said, 'How do you know he's a VC?' and the general reply would be, 'He's dead,' and that was sufficient."

The conditions are already emerging in Iraq for a similar kind of slaughter. It is only a matter of time before the US commits the type of atrocities in Iraq that some 30 years ago made "My Lai" and "destroying the village to save it" bywords for imperialist savagery.

Echoing the mantras of the Vietnam War, the US military command is talking about the struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the Iraqi people. So much for the pre-war predictions of euphoric support for the American "liberators" from a grateful and pliant Iraqi people.

As in Vietnam, the American "goodwill gestures" are at once pathetic and contemptuous. Immediately after storming through the town of Fallujah, brutalizing Iraqi men, women and children, the military organized a giveaway of soccer balls, school supplies and food. Residents reacted with hostility. Many kept their children away from schools where US civil affairs troops staged the giveaways, saying that they were afraid of the soldiers.

The *Washington Post* reported on the attempt by one army unit to turn a garbage-strewn lot into a sports field: "The US military engineers, weighed down by heavy flak jackets and helmets, toiled to clear vacant lots of waist-high garbage rotting in 115-degree heat and transform them into soccer fields. They said children threw rocks and bricks at them."

That such gestures should be treated as a cruel hoax is hardly surprising given the social chaos resulting from the war, together with the escalating US repression. Much of Iraq remains without regular electricity, clean water or a functioning sewer system. The threat of disease grows daily as the summer sends temperatures soaring.

Iraqi children are paying the greatest price. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) released a report earlier this month that the number of children suffering from diarrhea, the number one killer of infants, has more than doubled since the US occupation. Fully 72 percent of the children surveyed by the agency were suffering from the ailment, the result of the war's destruction of the country's water filtration and sewage treatment facilities. The number of cases of acute malnutrition among children under five in Baghdad has also doubled since the war, the UN agency said.

More than half a million children died from these same conditions in the aftermath of the first Gulf War as a result of the destruction of infrastructure and the UN sanctions. The US "liberation" is already producing similarly horrific results.

The adult population faces mass unemployment and deepening poverty. One of the first edicts issued by the new US colonial administrator, Paul Bremer, was the disbanding of the 400,000-man Iraqi army. This action has left an estimated 2.5 million people—10 percent of the population—without any means of support. Upwards of another 100,000 are blacklisted as former members of the Ba'ath Party under another order issued by Bremer.

The *Telegraph* of London Wednesday quoted a "very senior British official" describing the US reconstruction effort in Iraq as being "in chaos" and suffering from "a complete absence of strategic direction." The official added, "We are facing an almost complete inability to engage with what needs to be done and to bring to bear sufficient resources to make a difference." He warned that unless the US began to devote serious resources to the rebuilding of Iraq, "by the autumn, we could face the consequences."

There is more, however, than mere incompetence and indifference behind the catastrophe that the US occupation has unleashed on Iraq. The right-wing ideologues who control Washington's policy toward the occupied country have definite plans that require its economic leveling.

Their aim is to smash the pre-war structure of state-controlled industry and dismantle any and all restrictions on the ability of US-based corporations to exploit the country's resources, first and foremost its oil riches. The energy conglomerates and their political mouthpieces in the Bush administration view Iraq as a potential source of massive profits. They could not care less about the cost to the Iraqi people.

In addition to the wealth it can steal from Iraq, the American financial oligarchy and its military-political establishment see Iraq as a staging ground for further economic and military aggression in the Middle East and beyond. The aim is to establish, with Israel serving as junior partner, US domination over the entire region. This is part of a grand—and mad—plan to gain a stranglehold over the world's oil resources, which would enable Washington to blackmail friend and foe alike on the road to achieving global hegemony.

Aside from securing control of Iraqi oil facilities, establishing military bases and setting up the machinery of repression required to crush all opposition, the US has little interest in "rebuilding" Iraq. The humanitarian and democratic rhetoric is mere window dressing, aimed mainly at deceiving and manipulating public opinion at home.

Only recently Bremer announced new regulations making it a crime not only to voice support for the deposed Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, but to oppose continued US occupation. Anyone who calls for the withdrawal of American troops, either in speech, print or through protest demonstrations, may be subjected to military repression.

The American administration headed by Bremer has already unveiled plans for the sweeping privatization of state enterprises, beginning with the oil sector. It is widely suspected that the lucrative contracts handed out to Bechtel Corporation and other politically connected firms for the repair of Iraqi infrastructure will serve as a vehicle for the privatization of key public services, including water and electricity.

At a June 13 press conference, Bremer, pressed by reporters about the desperate economic conditions and continuing mass demonstrations by Iraqis demanding jobs, repeatedly declared that the situation would only be remedied by "fundamental economic reforms."

The US colonial chief claimed that the Iraqi people could decide for themselves what kind of economic system they wanted. He stressed, however, that a "vibrant private sector" was the "sine qua non for a stable economy and stable economic growth." He cynically added: "If they choose socialism, that will be their business. My guess is that's not going to happen."

The US occupation of Iraq is a brutal imperialist enterprise. The soldiers dying there are being sacrificed not for "democracy" or "liberation," but to further the predatory aims and interests of a gangster element within the American ruling elite. This layer has turned to military aggression as a means of enriching itself and distracting attention from the deepening economic and social contradictions within the US itself. It systematically lied to the American people, fabricating threats from non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" and phony terrorist links, to justify an unprovoked and illegal war of aggression.

The Iraqi people have every right to resist this occupation. Their democratic rights and social welfare can be secured only by throwing off the yoke of occupation.

They will continue to resist, and their struggle will inspire the oppressed masses throughout the Middle East to rise in opposition to US imperialism and its accomplices in the region—the oil sheikdoms and corrupt Arab bourgeois regimes from Jordan and Egypt to Syria and Lebanon. Future

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historians will record the US “victory” in Iraq as the catalyst for an unprecedented eruption of popular struggles against imperialism not only in the Middle East, but internationally.

And just as Vietnam became the focal point for an eruption of political and social struggles within the US, so too will Washington’s crimes in Iraq repel the broad mass of the American people, becoming a focal point for the deeply felt anger and disgust of working people for the right-wing clique headed by Bush and the financial oligarchy which it serves.

In the 1960s and 1970s the word “quagmire” became synonymous with the US military and political disaster in Vietnam. In Iraq, the Bush administration has landed US imperialism in a new quagmire, whose implications are even more catastrophic for the American ruling elite.

It is the elementary responsibility of working people in the US, Britain and internationally to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and British occupation forces from Iraq.

The international movement of millions against war that emerged in the months before the Iraq invasion proved incapable of stopping the onslaught. This was above all due to its lack of a viable and worked out political perspective. The movement against imperialist war must now be revived and developed on the basis of a new perspective—the independent political mobilization of the international working class to defeat the imperialist war machine and the profit system that it defends.

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