

American military morale shaken by Iraq quagmire

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The daily attacks and acts of sabotage against American and British forces in Iraq testify that the real war of liberation has begun—a protracted struggle by the Iraqi people to drive the foreign invaders out of their country. If US control over Iraq is to be secured, it will require an indefinite occupation by tens of thousands of troops that will result in thousands of American casualties.

This grim reality is dawning on a constituency the Bush administration and the extreme right in the United States take for granted—the American armed forces. Over the past two weeks, reports have been published by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Boston Herald* that provide some indication of the fears among US troops and their families over the state of affairs in Iraq.

A lengthy *New York Times* feature on June 15 detailed the physical and psychological trauma of American troops in one unit—the First Brigade of the Third Infantry Division, which has been on deployment since last September and was one of the frontline units in the assault on Baghdad. Now policing in Baghdad's eastern suburbs, the unit was supposed to have returned to the US in May but was kept in country due to the lack of security.

The troops are living 10 to a room in buildings without electricity, running water or air conditioning. Their days are taken up with patrolling streets that appear peaceful, but can erupt in gunfire without warning. Headlined “Anxious and Weary, GIs Face a New Iraq Mission,” the *Times* feature reported: “Some are haunted by the deaths they caused—and suffered—and have sought counseling. All are tired, hot and increasingly bitter. Morale has plummeted as sharply as the temperature has risen.”

According to the *Times*, the soldiers' families were

told on May 21 to stop sending them mail in an attempt to decrease homesickness. Some troops have sought counseling after hearing reports of sick families or unfaithful wives. One soldier told the *Times*: “You call Donald Rumsfeld and tell him our sorry asses are ready to come home.”

A total of 146,000 US military personnel remain in Iraq, along with some 15,000 British troops. They are stretched to the breaking point attempting to enforce the authority of the US occupation, and exert no meaningful control over large swathes of the country—including entire suburbs of Baghdad like the predominantly Shi'ite “Sadr City.” The *Washington Post* reported June 25 that just 35 US troops are stationed in the Iraqi province of Diyala, which has a population of 1.4 million and extends from Baghdad's northeastern suburbs to the border with Iran.

Under such conditions, Iraqi guerillas are demonstrating an ability to move freely in and out of major cities and oil fields to launch attacks on US forces and carry out acts of sabotage. They are doing so with increasing signs of coordination and skill. Since May 1, when Bush declared the US military mission in Iraq to have been successfully completed, 57 US troops have been killed in combat and accidents, and dozens have suffered serious injuries.

Two American soldiers and two Iraqis working with the Americans were killed June 26, and at least nine US troops were wounded in three separate attacks outside Baghdad. Between June 24 and 25, US vehicles were attacked on the main road to Baghdad airport, in the city's western suburbs, and in the town of Hilla, located 45 miles south of the capital. The attacks killed two marines and wounded at least six, as well as killing two Iraqi power workers working with the occupation forces.

Most of Baghdad has been without any power since June 23, allegedly due to a sabotage attack on power lines north of the city. Fuel pipelines needed to restore oil exports have been sabotaged four times in the last two weeks. At least 65 of the electricity transmission towers supplying the port of Umm Qasr and the southern oilfields have been destroyed.

On June 26, the Arab cable network Al Jazeera reported statements by two Iraqi organizations, the Mujahedeen of the Victorious Sect and the Popular Resistance for the Liberation of Iraq, calling for resistance to the American occupation. Such organizations have no lack of potential recruits.

The hatred of the Iraqi people for the occupying forces is obvious to the US troops on the ground. The *Washington Post* published a feature on June 19 headlined “US Troops Frustrated with Role in Iraq.” An army sergeant from the Fourth Infantry Division stationed in the town of Baqubah told the *Post* reporters: “What are we doing here? The war is supposed to be over but every day we hear of another soldier getting killed. Is it worth it? Saddam isn’t in power anymore. The locals want us to leave. Why are we here?” A soldier at a checkpoint told the *Post*: “Tell president Bush to bring us home.”

The retaliation of the US forces against attacks—roadblocks, curfews, weapons searches, detentions and the killing of numerous civilians—has only strengthened the anti-occupation sentiment among Iraqis. An engineering officer stationed in Baqubah informed the *Post* that when they had arrived “every single person was waving at us” but now, “they just stare.”

The difficulties of professional soldiers in units like the Third Infantry are amplified for the thousands of reservists—part-time soldiers—who have been called up from their civilian jobs. Of the 1.2 million military reservists and National Guard in the US, 212,000 are currently mobilized to support or replace the troops taking part in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The *New York Times* reported June 22 on the financial stress some reservists’ families are under due to the loss of income. Military pay is sometimes half the civilian salary of skilled reservists, such as doctors, aircraft mechanics and executives. A Northwest Airlines aircraft mechanic interviewed by the *Times* has seen his pay fall from \$6,000 a month to \$3,000 since

he was called up and sent to Kuwait, and he has been informed he is among the 4,900 Northwest workers who will be laid off this year.

The *Boston Herald* on June 25 published a report on the growing concerns and doubts among family members of soldiers stationed in Iraq. Gail Fahey, whose twin 23-year-old son and daughter are both in Iraq, told the *Herald*: “It’s a little nerve-wracking right now because of the unrest with the [Iraqi] citizens over there. My son wrote to me and said, ‘you don’t trust anybody, you don’t turn your back on anybody.’”

Jim Doherty, whose 21-year old son mans a Humvee patrolling the road to Baghdad airport, told the *Herald*: “I have friends saying ‘the worst is over, he’s all set and you don’t have anything to worry about.’ I often think: ‘Why don’t you tell that to the parents of the last soldier who got killed? It’s a daily battle, you know.’”

As in the Vietnam War, the eruption of US militarism will have a vast impact on the attitude of the American people toward American foreign policy and the military establishment. If they do not know already, they will inevitably come to know they were lied to about the reasons for the invasion of Iraq. There are no “weapons of mass destruction” that threatened the US; Iraq had no involvement in the attack on the World Trade Center or connections to Islamic terrorist groups; and whatever the Iraqi people’s attitude toward the Baathist dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, they did not welcome the American and British forces as “liberators.”

The real reasons why American troops are in the Middle East and Central Asia are oil and world power. Young people who voluntarily enlisted in the US armed forces to get a decent job, some skills or a college grant are killing and dying so American corporations can plunder the region’s wealth and resources. At a certain point it is likely they will, in large numbers, stop volunteering, and the government will have to force them to fight by conscripting them.



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