

British troops killed in Iraq totals 50

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Four more British troops were killed in the southern region of Iraq over the last two weeks, bringing the total number of UK casualties since the beginning of the war to 50.

On Wednesday July 27, a reservist of the First Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers was killed when a patrol returning to base in Amarah in a six-vehicle convoy with two Iraqi prisoners was ambushed by an angry crowd in a village. After firing warning shots into the crowd the British troops were said to have been attacked with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades.

According to a British army spokesman in Basra, the arrested Iraqis were "suspected Saddam loyalists" and the crowd "were really angry about the arrest of a well-known figure and were manipulated into expressing their anger."

Three British soldiers were killed the previous weekend when their two-vehicle convoy on patrol in Basra was attacked by gunmen in a pickup truck. The soldiers of the 19th Mechanised Brigade were riding in a Ford sports utility vehicle that appears to have been hit by a grenade. Other reports say that the utility vehicle crashed into a wall. Again the British military spokesman claimed that the attack was linked to "Saddam loyalists."

Another spokesman was reported by the *Guardian* denying that there would be any change in the "softly-softly" tactics that the British claim to have employed. This refers to reports in June when British politicians touring in the south of Iraq were told that British troops had been ordered not to wear helmets or flak jackets as part of a policy of "openness" toward the local population. The local people, predominantly Shiites and hostile to the Saddam Hussein regime were said to have welcomed the British intervention.

However, the attempt to play down the opposition to the illegal British occupation and to portray it as coming from a few remaining Baathists is wearing a little thin. The killing of Saddam's two sons in July, "cutting the head off the snake" as military propaganda put it, was supposed to break the alleged continued hold of Saddam

over his supporters. Yet the opposition has escalated.

The message from the British Army about the source of the attacks on their forces is contradictory. Some Army spokespersons in Basra have contradicted the Saddam-loyalist theory by claiming the attacks are from the Shia Muslim group Hizbollah and suggested links to Iran and Syria.

Nor is the British Army adopting a uniquely "soft" approach in contrast to the US military. An unnamed army source told the *Observer* newspaper, "To be honest, a lot of tosh is talked about helmets. We have always worn our helmets when and if the situation requires us to, and it will be no different now."

Neither do the statistics present a picture of British troops having more support in the local population than the US forces. Fourteen British troops have been killed since President Bush announced on May 1 that the war was officially over. Out of a total of 11,000 troops this is proportionately much higher than the corresponding American figure of 65 killed out of a total of 130,000.

The official line was also contradicted by Major Charles Heyman, editor of *Jane's World Armies*, who told the *Observer* after the three soldiers were killed in Basra: "Today's deaths were predictable, as is, I'm afraid, a low-level insurgency campaign against the occupying forces in Basra and southern Iraq for the foreseeable future."

The figures back up this view. At the beginning of August there were several days of riots and protests in Basra against the British occupation and the lack of electricity and fuel supplies. Seven British soldiers were injured as the riots were quelled by firing rubber bullets into the crowds and the army patrolled the streets in tanks. An ex-British army Nepalese man working for a private security firm was shot dead.

On August 14 there was an attack on a British army ambulance in the outskirts of Basra in which one soldier, Captain David Jones of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment, died after the vehicle was blown up by an improvised explosive device. Widespread coverage of Jones' funeral in the British media reflects growing

disquiet in ruling circles with Prime Minister Tony Blair's Iraq policy.

Doctors and medical staff are said to be demanding up to £1,000 a day to work in Iraq because of the increasingly dangerous conditions. Aid agencies have had to pull their personnel out although they are well used to working in unsettled environments. They perceive the great danger as being identified with the occupying forces.

The recent killings are not isolated pockets of resistance but reflect widespread hostility to the British forces. As the occupation continues resistance is growing even in the south of Iraq where the population had every reason to hate Saddam after the years of brutal repression they suffered under his regime.

Opposition is not simply from a few isolated supporters of the Baath regime, whose influence in this part of the country was small. Nor is it in all likelihood coming from pro-Iranian Islamic fundamentalists since Iran has told them to cooperate with the occupation in the hope of getting greater influence in any semi-colonial government that is established in Iraq.

As the reports of mass demonstrations and protests indicate, the opposition is from the population as a whole. It is clear that both the army and leading elements in the British political elite are becoming concerned at the speed with which such mass opposition has emerged in an area they believed would be relatively friendly.

Despite their centuries of colonial experience, the British political class has misread the situation badly. Blair himself may pay a price for leading British forces into what has all the hallmarks of a military disaster in the making. But the price paid by British soldiers will be considerably higher. Many of the young people whom the British army is now vigorously recruiting will pay for the military debacle in Iraq with their lives.



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