

Escalating attacks on US troops in Iraq

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Despite denials from Washington and the US military, armed resistance to the US occupation of Iraq is expanding both in scope and intensity. Late last week ambushes of US troops in Tikrit and Khaldiyyah, to the north and west of Baghdad respectively, turned into pitched gun battles that lasted for hours, notwithstanding the overwhelming superiority of US military firepower.

Two US military convoys were hit by mine explosions in Khaldiyyah on Thursday afternoon. After the first convoy ground to a halt, it was attacked with small arms and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). The battle raged for more than three hours as the US military used tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and helicopter gunships to try to destroy the fighters. Three US vehicles were destroyed.

According to eyewitnesses, US soldiers responded to the attack by shooting randomly, menacing journalists attempting to cover it. An Associated Press photographer and his driver were forced to run for their lives when a tank opened fire on their car with a heavy machine gun. At nightfall the US troops pulled out, dragging away their burnt-out vehicles.

Two US soldiers were wounded in the incident along with an unknown number of Iraqi fighters and civilians. The Pentagon has refused to keep a tally of Iraqi casualties. Local residents told the media that three young men had suffered wounds—two in the shoulder and one in the chest. After the US troops withdrew, hundreds of Khaldiyyah residents danced in the streets and fired rifles into the air.

Jihad Afash Masir, 40, told a reporter that he had allowed two attackers to fire at the convoy from behind a cement barrier that encloses his front yard. “There was no better place for them [to shoot from],” he said, adding that he did not fear retribution. “We are sacrificing ourselves for our country.” Others indicated their support for the return of Saddam Hussein and the relative stability of his rule.

Khaldiyyah, like neighbouring Fallujah, is a centre of hostility to the US occupation and has become a virtual no-go area for US troops. The local police are treated as

collaborators in the US pay. Last Monday, the town’s police chief Colonel Khedeir Mekhalef Ali was assassinated in a brazen daylight attack as he was returning home to Fallujah. “There’s no security. As long as the Americans are here, there’s no stability,” wounded officer Fouad Fadhil Eissa complained from his hospital bed.

Later on Thursday night, three US soldiers were killed at the village of Al Ouja on the outskirts of Tikrit after their patrol came under sustained small arms fire. The US military responded with overwhelming force, firing on houses and farm buildings with Apache attack helicopters in a clash that lasted throughout the night. By daybreak, nearly 60 Iraqis had been rounded up and detained as suspects.

According to the local US commander, Colonel James Hickey, the ambush was one of a series of attacks on US forces that appeared to be coordinated. “We saw action from the west and east side of Tikrit. That is unusual,” he said. Hickey played down the attacks, dismissing those involved as being “a handful of rearguards attempting to maintain a degree of political relevance.”

Hickey’s explanation simply reflects the stock standard line from Washington—that any resistance to the US occupation comes from Baath Party “holdouts,” criminals or Islamic terrorists from outside the country. But the lies are becoming more threadbare as the widespread nature of the hostility to the US and its collaborators becomes more evident. The Pentagon may not provide details of its house-to-house searches, arbitrary detentions or the number of civilian casualties, but its thuggish activities have their impact nevertheless.

An article on the *Occupation Watch* website on September 17 explained that the US military carries out dozens of largely unreported, house raids every day, “blowing open gates, kicking down doors and shoving faces in the dirt.” The report graphically described a raid last Tuesday with women screaming in protest as US soldiers dragged off about a dozen men. A 10-year-old boy who was herded with his family into the garden

declared: "I will become an Iraqi fighter and I will kill Americans. They are the enemy."

The *New York Times* reported last week that some US officials are increasingly concerned about the rising hostility in Iraq to the US occupation. Speaking on condition of anonymity, they said it was a mistake for the administration to discount the role of ordinary Iraqis whose anger over the American presence appeared to be kindling sympathy for those attacking US forces. "To a lot of Iraqis, we're no longer the guys who threw out Saddam, but the ones who are busting down doors and barging in on their wives and daughters," one said.

According to the newspaper, a survey of public opinion in Iraq recently conducted by the State Department's intelligence branch found "significant levels of hostility" to the US occupation. "Officials said indications of that hostility extended well beyond the Sunni heartland of Iraq, which has been the main setting for attacks on American forces, to include the Shiite-dominated south, whose citizens have been more supportive of the American military presence but have also loudly protested about raids and other American actions."

While some officials downplayed the findings, others warned matters could get worse. "As time goes on, if the infrastructure doesn't improve, and the American troops are still out there front and centre, it's hard to see the public mood getting any better," one told the *New York Times*. Moreover, as the Shiite organisations and Kurdish militia represented on the Iraqi Governing Council become increasingly exposed as US puppets, armed resistance is likely to extend beyond the Sunni areas.

The daily toll of attacks on US troops has prompted the Pentagon to speed up plans to train Iraqi police and to reform the Iraqi army. The US military is also doing deals with tribal chiefs, militia commanders and local strongmen to enlist their support in patrolling key cities and towns. Washington's chief administrator Paul Bremer III, announced earlier this month that the US would pay tribal fighters to guard infrastructure such as oil pipelines and the electricity grid.

Inevitably, the results will be similar to those in Afghanistan, where a patchwork of warlords dominates the country with scant regard for the democratic rights or welfare of the majority of the population. Moreover, those who assist in propping up the US occupation will be seen as collaborators and quislings and become targets for attack along with coalition troops. These underlying processes have been further confirmed by the events of the last few days.

* Anger in Fallujah was further fuelled last Wednesday when a US patrol shot and killed a 14-year-old boy and wounded six others after mistaking celebratory gunfire at a wedding. According to a local resident, the soldiers got out of their Humvees and, believing themselves under attack, began shooting wildly in all directions. The death came less than a week after protests at the US killing of 10 Fallujah police and a Jordanian guard in a so-called friendly fire incident.

* On Saturday morning, a member of the Iraqi Governing Council, Aquila al Hashimi, was ambushed shortly after she left her home in western Baghdad. She was critically injured and taken to hospital with wounds to her stomach, shoulder and leg. Hashimi is the only council member who belonged to the Baath Party and served in the regime of Saddam Hussein. The attack is the first time an assassination attempt has been made on a member of the governing council.

* Three more US soldiers were killed in two separate attacks on Saturday. Two US troops died and 13 others were wounded in a mortar attack on the Abu Gharib prison, 20 km west of Baghdad. Another soldier was killed in Ramadi, 110 km west of Baghdad, when the vehicle in which he was travelling was hit with an "improvised explosive device". Their deaths brings to 82 the number of US soldiers who have died in guerrilla attacks since US President Bush announced the end of major combat operations on May 1.



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