

As Bush lies, Iraq seethes against US occupation

James Conachy
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The Bush administration has embarked on a propaganda campaign to deceive the American people about the actual state of affairs in Iraq.

On Monday, Bush asserted in a series of interviews that there was “a sense that people in America aren’t getting the truth” about the situation. “Good progress,” he told Tribune Broadcasting, was being made by US administrator Paul Bremer toward establishing a “free Iraq.” In his October 11 radio address, Bush downplayed the resistance to the US occupation, declaring the US was “actively pursuing the terrorists and Saddam [Hussein] holdouts who desperately oppose freedom for the Iraqi people.” Iraq, he asserted, was seeing “thousands of new businesses,” “busy markets” and “store shelves...filled with goods.” With US help, “the roads and ports and railways necessary for commerce” were being built. Iraq’s oil production was being restored, “the benefits of which are flowing directly to the Iraqi people.”

While Bush and other members of his administration repeated such lies throughout the week, the truth is that six months on from the fall of Baghdad, the US invasion has produced an unspeakable tragedy for the Iraqi people.

The United Nations (UN) and the World Bank estimated this month that Iraq’s economy will shrink 22 percent this year. In 1980, average annual Iraqi income was over \$3,000. Hussein’s US-backed war with Iran, the 1991 Gulf war and the subsequent decade of UN sanctions saw it plunge to only \$1,020 by 2001. The UN is now predicting that annual income will fall another third this year, to just \$450 to \$610, as a result of the US invasion. No one expects the situation to improve in 2004. More than 70 percent of working-age Iraqi adults—some 12 million people—are unemployed.

According to Bechtel Corp. engineers, Baghdad barely receives half the electricity supply it requires and its water is 25 percent more polluted than before the war. Raw sewage runs in the streets and is pouring from damaged mains into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The phone system is dysfunctional. Large parts of the city still lie in ruins from the war and from post-war looting. There are ongoing fuel shortages. Endemic crime has driven up both the death rate and personal insecurity. Malnutrition has doubled, according to the aid agency Oxfam.

No amount of propaganda can obscure the fact that behind the resistance, the Iraqi people correctly blame the US for the catastrophe they face. Whether or not former Baathists or even foreign Islamic extremists are mainly responsible for the attacks against American troops, as Washington claims, the struggle to force the US out of Iraq clearly enjoys broad popular sympathy. The Bush administration, with its trademark arrogance and stupidity, is on the verge of unleashing a Palestinian-style intifada.

The last two weeks indicate that an uprising is brewing against the US occupation of Iraq in the largely Shiite Muslim, working-class slums of east Baghdad. Now known as “Sadr City” and home to two million of the country’s poorest and most oppressed, the area has no shelves “filled with goods.” Even if it did, the people have no money with which to buy them.

Radical Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr, the son of a cleric who was murdered in 1999 by Saddam Hussein, has been steadily assuming de-facto control over the area. Only in his early 30s, Sadr’s authority has been growing among the urban poor, and more generally among the Shiite majority in Iraq, due to his vocal denunciations of the poverty and degradation of Iraq and his demands that the Americans leave. The 10,000-strong militiamen he commands are openly carrying rifles and even heavier weapons in Sadr City.

The response of the US military has been reckless attempts at repression. On October 6, American troops detained a close associate of Sadr, Moayad al Khazraji, on allegations his mosque was being used to store weapons. The act provoked violent demonstrations over the following days, involving thousands of young Shiites.

In the hours after the October 10 suicide-bombing against a police station in Sadr City, the US authority sent troops to surround the personal headquarters of Sadr himself, in what appears to have been an attempt to blame the act on the Shiite leader and detain him. According to Iraqi sources cited by the *New York Times*, the American soldiers who entered the building were overcome, badly beaten and had their weapons taken from them. A three-vehicle convoy of US reinforcements came under heavy fire after they shot at the Shiite militiamen protecting Sadr. Two Americans were killed and four wounded. Two Iraqis were also killed. US troops withdrew rather than confront the hundreds of armed Shiite militiamen who took up positions on rooftops and established roadblocks.

Shiite clerics reportedly used mosque loudspeakers to ask their followers not to try to shoot down the American helicopters flying overhead with their arsenal of rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers.

The following days saw mass defiance of the US authorities in Sadr City. Funeral processions of over 10,000 paraded the bodies of the two Shiite casualties down the main streets of the suburb, chanting anti-American slogans. The *New York Times* reported that a cleric supporter of Sadr told the crowd: “America, which calls itself the supporter of democracy, is nothing but a big terrorist organization that is leading the world with its terrorism and arrogance.” Ultimatums have been issued that American troops are not permitted in the area. The Shiite clergy around Sadr have announced their intention to form their own “provisional government,” in opposition to the pro-US puppet regime.

On Thursday, US tanks and troops moved into Sadr City to evict militiamen from a council building they occupied. More than 12 supporters of the fundamentalist cleric were detained. An unnamed spokesman for the US authority told AFP: “There are some very serious allegations about the activities attributed to Sadr or his followers. We take these allegations very seriously. We will uphold the rule of law in this country.”

Late Thursday night, a firefight between a US patrol and followers of another Shiite cleric broke out near a mosque in the central Iraqi city of Karbala, killing three American soldiers, two Iraqi policemen and at least five members of a local Shiite militia. Seven US soldiers were also

wounded in the clash. While the US command claimed that its forces were ambushed without provocation, supporters of the Shiite cleric, Mahmoud al-Hassani, said that the American patrol attacked armed guards protecting the mosque.

The US military deployed tanks, armored personnel carriers and snipers in Sadr City as thousands of Shiites attending Friday prayers shouted “No, No USA.” In Karbala on Friday, a US armored personnel carrier opened fire on a crowded street, as Shiite militiamen continued occupying rooftops, and snipers of the US-led forces also took up positions. A direct confrontation between the US occupation and the Shiite militias could send American—and Iraqi—casualties soaring.

US troops are already suffering at least a dozen attacks per day in the so-called “Sunni Triangle,” an area that encompasses the Sunni Muslim districts of Baghdad to Saddam Hussein’s hometown of Tikrit. In the first two weeks of this month, 14 US soldiers were killed and at least another 24 wounded in the area. Most of the casualties have been inflicted by “improvised explosive devices” (IED’s)—relatively unsophisticated bombs assembled from the ordnance that litters Iraq and detonated by remote control as US vehicles pass by.

Other resistance attacks have included the gunning down of a Spanish military intelligence agent in front of his Baghdad residence. An assassination attempt has been made against a member of the US-installed Iraqi Governing Council and against the US-appointed governor of Diyala province, which borders Baghdad.

In Baghdad, suicide bombers—recruited from among Iraq’s most desperate and traumatized—have emerged as a major fear. In the five days from October 9 to 14, suicide bombers in the city detonated explosive-filled vehicles at the police station in Sadr City, as well as at the CIA’s Baghdad Hotel headquarters and the Turkish embassy. An unconfirmed *New York Times* report suggests that at least several other potential car-bombers were apprehended before they could carry out their missions. Two more suicide bombers were caught on October 16, one attempting to blow up the new Iraqi Finance Ministry in Baghdad and another attempting to drive an explosives-filled car into a police headquarters in Irbil.

In Kirkuk, a city outside the “Sunni Triangle” that the US military had claimed was under control, an American soldier told the *Washington Post* that attacks had been “pretty much non-stop” this month. A US-controlled prison has been mortared. Snipers shoot at US soldiers patrolling the airfield most nights. Iraqi police have been killed in several attacks on checkpoints. The local office of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIR), a Shiite organization that has collaborated with the US, was mortared on October 7.

In the southern Shiite region of Basra, British troops have also come under increasing attack. A military headquarters in Basra city was mortared on October 8, injuring three soldiers. A British marine involved in boat patrols along the Shatt Al Arab waterway told the *Plymouth Herald*: “There are rounds going off on the river all the time. It’s more dangerous now than it was during the war.” An officer described the situation as a “harsh environment,” in which his marines were under “constant threat” and had to “keep on their toes.” Former members of the Iraqi military demonstrated in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Basra at the beginning of the month over unemployment. In Basra, British troops shot dead two protesters.

The US military is responding to the deteriorating situation with a reign of terror, conducting night-time raids, roadblocks and mass detentions in a desperate effort to crush what it calls “anti-coalition activity.” An estimated 5,500 Iraqi political prisoners are presently being held in American-run concentration camps. The US military admits that another 13,000 have been detained at some time and released. It is believed that a further 10,000 people are being held in Iraqi police stations. Reports are now appearing in the international press of US forces destroying the

homes and crops of Iraqi villagers in reprisal for attacks.

It is not known how many Iraqi civilians are being killed by American soldiers—the US military does not count—but anecdotal evidence suggests that it numbers in the hundreds every month. The Baghdad Central Morgue processed 751 deaths in July and 872 deaths in August. Seventy percent were due to gunshot injuries. In July of last year, the same morgue handled only 237 deaths, with only 21 being caused by gunshots. The increase in gunshot deaths is not simply the product of an increased homicide rate. American troops regularly unleash indiscriminate gunfire in residential areas when they are fired upon, fatally wounding civilian bystanders. Other Iraqis have been killed at checkpoints for failing to stop their vehicles quickly enough.

Perhaps the clearest refutation of Bush’s claims that things are going well is the orientation that the Pentagon is giving American troops preparing to leave for Iraq. They are being told to fear the entire Iraqi population. SBS Australia television captured on video how a military trainer was psychologically preparing one group of soldiers:

“Don’t think just because there’s no trouble in Shiite neighbourhoods that they’re going to pat you on the back and give you a Coke and say ‘Hey, good job America,’ alright. They don’t like you any more than anybody else does because you’re a non-believer, you’re an infidel, OK, and that’s just the way that it is. And you can get that in your mind—it doesn’t matter if you’re black, you’re white, Hispanic, Thai or whatever—they don’t like you because you’re not a Muslim. And even if you were a Muslim, they wouldn’t like you because you’re American, so you’re screwed no matter what, OK. Just remember that....

“You need to keep in mind these people’s mindset. They’re paranoid, OK. They don’t trust the West, alright...it goes all the way back to the Crusades. OK. The only reason they can think of for us to be there, we must want to get rid of f***ing Islam, we must want all their oil, that’s what they’re thinking, OK. That’s not true, it’s not what we’re there for, but that’s their mindset.” (SBS Television, *Dateline*, September 24, 2003, “Trouble on the Homefront”, transcript available at: <http://www.sbs.com.au/dateline/index.php3?daysum=2003-09-24>)

Such racist conceptions are being promoted to dehumanize the Iraqis and inure US troops to the criminal task they have been given by the Bush administration—carrying out the mass repression of 24 million people.



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