

The US sinks deeper into the Iraqi quagmire

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7 September 2004

Following the protracted siege in Najaf, news of Iraq has largely been pushed to one side in the international media. The end to the Najaf standoff has, however, resolved nothing. US troops and Iraqi security forces come under intense daily attack throughout the country and respond with repressive measures that only fuel broader hostility and hatred to the occupation. Many towns have become no-go areas that lie outside the control of US-installed interim government in Baghdad.

Last weekend constituted a particularly bloody example.

Two days of fierce fighting took place in Tal Afar to the west of the northern city of Mosul. US and Iraqi forces entered the town in force and arrested an alleged resistance leader early Saturday morning, sparking a fierce counterattack lasting hours. A US attack helicopter was shot down and a Stryker armoured vehicle disabled, prompting the American military to call in an air strike on the town.

According to hospital officials, at least 12 Iraqis were killed and another 60 injured in the fighting. A local doctor told the *Al Jazeera* website: “The victims are usually innocent civilians. Most of the injured are in a critical condition, forcing us to send them to Mosul due to a shortage of surgeons in our hospital.” Fighting continued on Sunday claiming the lives of another four Iraqis and injuring 19 more.

The US military claims that Tal Afar is used as a staging post for anti-US fighters from Syria, but repeated operations in the town have clearly generated local opposition. A resident, Ahmed Abbas, 45, told the *Los Angeles Times*: “It appears that the American forces want another Fallujah in Tal Afar as they oppress us day and night by arresting people.” He angrily criticised the Iraqi national guards supporting the American troops, branding them as “traitors”.

To the south of Baghdad, around 2,000 Marines backed by Iraqi security forces stormed into the town of Latifiya on Saturday, rounding up 500 people alleged to have links to armed insurgent groups. At least 12 Iraqi police have been killed and five national guardsmen wounded so far

in the operation. Latifiya and neighbouring Mahmudiya, 20 kilometres away, are both described as no-go areas. An Iraqi national guard officer told Agence France Presse that the operation would last at least a week.

The US-led attack in Latifiya was launched amid efforts by the French government to negotiate the release of two journalists—Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot—who have been held hostage since being captured near the town on August 20. French officials were reportedly furious that the sweep through the town could endanger the lives of the two, but did not openly criticise the decision. French Muslim leader, Fouad Alaoui, who flew to Iraq to take part in negotiations, cautiously commented on Monday: “I think that [the military operation] is making the mission difficult.”

Also on Saturday, a large car bomb exploded outside a police-training academy in the northern city of Kirkuk, killing 20 people and wounding another 36—most of them police recruits. The device was detonated as hundreds of recruits were streaming out of the building. A number of smaller-scale attacks took place on the same day, including mortar shells directed at the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad, where the first session of the puppet interim national council was being convened. Near the southern city of Basra, a major oil pipeline was damaged, limiting the flow of oil to export tanks at the port.

The events of the weekend provide just a glimpse of the situation throughout Iraq. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 31 pointed out that the fighting, far from abating after the installation of the interim government, had in fact intensified. In the two months since the so-called handover of sovereignty, US forces have been attacked on average 60 times a day—up 20 percent from the previous three-month period—and more than 110 US troops have been killed.

In comments to the newspaper, US Army Colonel Dana Pittard of the 1st Infantry Division based in Baqubah dismissed the suggestion that the insertion of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi had made a difference. “There was a government in South Vietnam all those years ago, and

we lost a lot of people back there,” he said. Pittard was openly sceptical of US claims that anti-US fighters numbered only 4,000 to 6,000. He put so-called hard-core support for the armed resistance at about 0.5 percent of the Iraqi population—i.e., about 120,000.

Michael O’Hanlon from the Brookings Institute told the *Los Angeles Times*: “We are losing more people because the resistance is just firing more shots at us. They are just hitting us hard and everywhere. The reason they are effective is because they just have more people shooting at us.”

An article in the *New York Times* on September 5 entitled “One by One, Iraqi cities become No-Go Zones” highlighted the fact that the US military was progressively losing its grip on the country. Along with Fallujah and Ramadi, US troops have now effectively pulled out of Samarra.

At a recent meeting with local tribal leaders, Major General R.S. Batiste attempted to lay down the law, declaring: “Not one dime of American taxpayers’ money will come into your city until you help us drive out the terrorists.” But, as the article noted: “The sheiks nodded, smiled and withdrew, back to the city that neither they, nor the American military, any longer control.”

In the Shiite south, the ending of the three-week siege in Najaf brought no conclusive victory to Allawi or the US military. Rebel cleric Moqtada al-Sadr withdrew with his militia forces intact and, under the terms of the agreement brokered by Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, US forces were compelled to pull back from the area surrounding the Shiite shrines in Najaf and neighbouring Karbala.

A new confrontation is brewing in Sadr City—the extensive slum area of Baghdad which is home to an estimated two million, mainly Shiite, poor. The suburb, named after Sadr’s father, is the cleric’s stronghold. The US military and the Allawi government are insisting that the Mahdi army disarm and relinquish control of the area. Sadr, however, is insisting that US troops, with the exception of reconstruction teams, keep out. “All we want is for the Americans to stay out. When the Americans come into the city, they insult our people,” Sadr spokesman Yusef al-Nasiri declared.

Allawi, who is seeking to bring the area under government control with a mixture of bribes and threats, has rejected the proposal. A tentative ceasefire broke down last Tuesday leading to fresh fighting in the suburb. A Madhi Army spokesman Abu Thar al-Kinana told *Al Jazeera*: “The clashes have erupted due to the US forces

and Iraqi government violation of the truce, arrest operations, [and] storming of safe houses.” He warned that “if the uprising breaks out again, it will be in all Iraqi governorates, not only Sadr City.”

In a chilling indication of what the US is preparing, Major General Peter Chiarelli told Associated Press last week that action was necessary to prevent Sadr from rebuilding the Mahdi Army. “He’s decided the best thing for him to do is to go underground and regroup. We are not going to allow that to happen,” Chiarelli said. “We are going to go in and first make Sadr City safe for residents.” He noted that the suburb had “no ultra-sensitive Muslim holy places” like the Iman Ali Shrine in Najaf—in other words, nothing that would prevent a full-scale US bombardment resulting in appalling civilian casualties.

The Pentagon is adopting the same approach to other resistance strongholds in the lead up to national elections due in January. Lieutenant General Thomas Metz, commander of US land forces in Iraq, said on Sunday that a US assault on one or more of the no-go areas in Iraq was likely in the next four months. Some towns, he speculated, might want to negotiate. “If you’re a leader in a town... do you want to have to go rebuild it because it got destroyed, because foreign fighters came to hang out in your city? They can help us make these decisions,” he said.

Those areas that were not subdued prior to the poll would simply be left out. Metz contemptuously declared: “That’s not our intention... [But] I’d envision the Iraqis could have an election. And if a piece of cancer in the country like Fallujah didn’t participate, it would still... be a legitimate election.”

Far from ending the quagmire in Iraq, such methods will only deepen it. The US contempt for basic democratic rights, combined with the unbridled use of military force to deal with opposition, is only breeding further resistance. Yesterday, seven more US marines, as well as three Iraqi soldiers, were killed when a suicide bomber drove a vehicle packed with explosives alongside their convoy near Fallujah and detonated the charges. The deaths bring the total number of US soldiers killed in Iraq to 990.



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