

After Fallujah's destruction: US occupation force to reach 150,000

Joseph Kay
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The Pentagon announced Wednesday that the number of US troops deployed in Iraq will increase by 12,000 over the next month, reaching an all-time high of 150,000. The decision to expand the occupation force comes in the midst of a stepped-up campaign of repression aimed at quelling increasing resistance from the Iraqi population.

Most of the increase will come from an extension of the tours of duty for troops already stationed in Iraq. This includes 3,500 members of the Second Brigade of the First Cavalry Division, who have already had their tour extended by two months. In addition to carrying out operations in Baghdad, the division participated in the assault on Fallujah last month.

While the Pentagon is presenting the increase in troop strength as merely a step to ensure "security" in the run-up to the elections scheduled for the end of January, its real significance lies elsewhere. With the assault on Fallujah, the US military initiated a major offensive designed to crush the Iraqi resistance through the use of overwhelming force.

The resulting death and destruction has only intensified opposition within the Iraqi population, requiring the introduction of more troops. The pattern is similar to the early days of Vietnam: opposition leads to more troops; escalation then leads to more opposition. Washington's only response to the mass hostility generated by the occupation is ever-greater repression and bloodshed.

The increase in troop strength is an indication that things are not going as well for the American military in Iraq as is often presented by the American media. More than three weeks after the assault on Fallujah began, and even after the US military has leveled much of the city, there are still running battles there. The level of resistance has grown in Baghdad and in other parts of the so-called Sunni Triangle, as well as in the northern city of Mosul.

The US occupation has been unable to garner any significant support from the Iraqi population. Even the security forces trained by the US have, in many cases, deserted their posts when confronted by resistance forces. According to an American officer quoted by the *Financial Times*, one of the reasons additional US troops are needed is to take up posts at Iraqi police stations.

It is very unlikely that the number of troops will drop from its new high, even after the elections. Richard Stark, a retired colonel and troop specialist at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, noted, "The department [of defense] is managing the force as frugally and carefully as possible, but we may not fall much

below the 150,000 level for more than a year."

Indeed, it is much more likely that even more troops will be sent in coming months. Several prominent American politicians, including Republican Senators John McCain and Richard Lugar, have called for a greater increase than the 12,000 announced by the Pentagon, as has the *New York Times*, the leading organ of the liberal establishment. The essential logic of the military campaign will require an ever-escalating concentration of forces, which will eventually necessitate an expansion of the military and a draft.

Many of the new troops will be used to fortify the American military presence in the city of Fallujah. There has been a blackout of reporting from the city, as the only reporters there are those embedded with American troops. What is clear, however, is that the American military has laid waste to what was once a city of 250,000.

One of the few reports to come out in the American press gives an indication of the extent of destruction. Robert Worth reported in the *New York Times* on December 1 ("In Fallujah's ruins, big plans and a risk of chaos") that the military faces an "unusual challenge: how to win back the confidence of the people whose city they have just destroyed."

The statement that Fallujah has been "destroyed"—a term that had not been employed before by the American media—is remarkable. Even under conditions of extraordinary self-censorship, the truth of the utter devastation wreaked upon the Iraqi city is beginning to seep into the mainstream press. Read between the lines, and one gets a picture of an atrocity of horrifying dimensions.

"The full extent of the damage inflicted by American bombs, tanks and artillery is only now becoming apparent," Worth continued. "The number of buildings destroyed in the fighting is far higher than 200, the figure released last week by the Iraqi prime minister, Ayad Allawi, engineers and commanders say. The city's power lines are so badly damaged than in most of the city, they will have to be ripped out and rebuilt from scratch."

The author does not give an indication of how many buildings have in fact been destroyed in the American aerial bombardment and subsequent invasion. Other estimates suggest that as many as a third of the buildings in the entire city have been seriously damaged or destroyed. American policy during the invasion was to respond to gunfire by leveling any building suspected of housing resistance fighters.

Many of the city's residents who were able to leave the city are

now concentrated in squalid refugee camps in surrounding regions. The *Times* article made clear that many of these refugees will be unable to return to what is left of their homes for months. Those who do return to the city will be herded into a virtual concentration camp, overseen by the American military.

Worth writes, “Some American officers here are skeptical about their ability to bring back safely more than a small number of residents in time for the national provincial elections in January.”

Those families that do return will be forced into conditions of martial law. “[T]he head of every household will be asked to wear an identification badge, Colonel [John Ballard, the commander of Marine Fourth Civil Affairs Group] said, and American and Iraqi troops will be given special rules of engagement to deal with theft.” While the colonel did not spell out these “rules of engagement,” NBC News has reported that the military will arrogate to itself the right to shoot anyone on sight.

Transportation in the city will be thoroughly controlled. “No cars will be allowed in the city at first, to prevent bombs. Instead, a bus system will provide free transportation.” Whatever system is put in place will no doubt be run by American forces, meaning that Iraqis will be prevented from traveling through the city without US permission.

Worth further noted in passing, “To help revive the city’s economy, the Marines will ask all returning residents with relevant skills to take a job in the reconstruction projects.” In other words, after having laid waste to their city, massacred thousands of its residents and arrested thousands more, the military will now be forcing those who return to work in American-controlled “reconstruction” projects.

The Orwellian character of the American enterprise comes out quite clearly. In the name of “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” the American military is seeking to impose, to the extent that it is able, a police state with totalitarian control of the population.

US forces are still carrying out operations against Iraqi fighters in some parts of the city. Many Arab media sources and eyewitnesses have reported that they are using chemical weapons—including napalm—to annihilate any remaining opposition.

According to a report by Pepe Escobar published on the *Asia Times* web site: “Fallujah doctors have identified either swollen and yellowish corpses without any injuries, or ‘melted bodies’ - victims of napalm, the terrifying cocktail of polystyrene and jet fuel. Our sources confirm testimonies by residents who managed to escape the Jolan neighborhood of bombing by ‘poisonous gases’. A resident called Abu Sabah told of ‘weird bombs that smoke like a mushroom cloud...and then small pieces fall from the air with long tails of smoke behind them. The pieces of these strange bombs explode into large fires that burn the skin even when you throw water over them.’ This is exactly what happens to people bombed with napalm or white phosphorus.”

Al-Quds Press has cited unnamed resistance sources as stating, “The US occupation troops are gassing resistance fighters and confronting them with internationally-banned chemical weapons.”

Al Jazeera quoted Ibrahim al-Kubaisi, a Baghdad doctor who accompanied a medical convoy that was denied entry into Fallujah by American troops. According to al-Kubaisi, “There is a terrible crime going in Fallujah and they do not want anybody to know. I

transferred four injured people from the Jordanian field hospital [near Fallujah] to a hospital in Baghdad. They told me that there is a crime in there; chemical weapons are being used. The corpses don’t have traces of gunshots but black patches. US forces allow people to go into al-Hadra al-Muhammadiya area, in Fallujah, but they prohibited anybody from entering al-Julan, al-Askari and al-Senai neighborhoods [where fighting is ongoing].”

Iraqi Red Crescent spokesman Muhammad al-Nuri estimates that some 6,000 people have been killed, many of them civilians. He told the BBC that it was hard to move around in the city because of the number of dead bodies littering the streets.

According to al-Nuri, “Bodies can be seen everywhere and people were crying when receiving the food parcels [delivered by the Iraqi Red Crescent]. It is very sad, it is a human disaster.”

The actual number of deaths is impossible to determine without access to the city. According to some reports, the American military has already disposed of much of the evidence in mass graves.

Aid reached parts of the city only last week. From the start of the invasion until then, the US military had blocked any assistance from reaching Fallujah’s beleaguered residents.

According to a report in *Al Jazeera*, the reason the aid was eventually allowed was apparently to prepare a trap for residents. The news agency quotes a Fallujah resident as stating that US forces called on families to go to the Red Crescent centre to receive aid. “US forces then surrounded the Red Crescent centre after people had arrived there to receive aid supplies, preventing anyone from exiting it. US forces later allowed only women, children and males aged under 15 and above 55 to get out.”



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