

US and Iraqi government troops begin lockdown of Baghdad

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Operation Lightning—the massive deployment of 50,000 US and Iraqi government troops and police into the streets of Baghdad—began on Sunday and is unfolding amid a virtual media blackout and a complete absence of critical commentary. What is taking place amounts to the re-invasion of Iraq’s capital aimed at terrorising the population and cracking down on resistance groups that operate freely across large sections of the city.

There is no doubt that the operation was unveiled by the Iraqi government of Ibrahim al-Jaafari on the direct orders of Washington. For two days in May, Jaafari was involved in meetings with the top US commander in Iraq, General George Casey, who reportedly lectured him on the need to “respond with strong and decisive action” to the wave of bombings and killings taking place across Iraq. The meetings with Casey were followed by a visit to Iraq by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on May 15, where further demands were placed on Jaafari’s newly-installed administration.

The crackdown is being justified with references to the 434 Iraqi civilians who were killed and the 775 wounded in May, many in politically reactionary bombings that made no attempt to distinguish between occupation targets and ordinary people. The main Iraqi resistance groups condemn such bombings, which are generally blamed on groups connected with Al Qaeda.

The concern of the White House and the Pentagon, however, is the growing number of casualties that guerilla attacks are inflicting on the occupation forces. The US military lost 78 dead and more than 500 wounded in May—the largest number since January. The Iraqi security forces also suffered heavy losses. At least 151 Iraqi police were killed and 325 wounded—more than double the number in April. At least 85 Iraqi

soldiers were killed and 79 wounded.

The aim of Operation Lightning is to try and curb the insurgency by cutting it off from its support base among the broader population. The 50,000 troops in the capital will throw up 675 permanent checkpoints at all entrances to the city and at key intersections throughout the suburbs. The checkpoints will be manned by soldiers of the US-created Iraqi Army. As they go up, each of 22 sectors the city has been divided into will be subjected to sweeps and house searches by Iraqi and US forces.

“Riverbend”, an Iraqi woman in Baghdad, wrote in her blog on May 29: “It’s difficult enough right now getting around Baghdad, more checkpoints are going to make things trickier. The plan includes 40,000 Iraqi security forces and that is making people a little bit uneasy. Iraqi National Guard are not pleasant or upstanding citizens—to have thousands of them scattered about Baghdad stopping cars and possibly harassing civilians is worrying. We’re also very worried about the possibility of raids on homes.”

While little information is available, it is clear that a massive sweep is already underway. A spokesman for Jaafari claimed that over 500 “arrests” had been carried out in just the first two days of the operation.

Highlighting the indiscriminate character of the arrests, one of those detained was Mohsen Abdel Hamid, the leader of the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party who has been engaged over in recent months in high-level discussions with Iraqi government and US officials over joining the occupation regime. Pentagon officials told the *Los Angeles Times* that US troops operating near Hamid’s house obtained “intelligence” that insurgents were hiding there.

In the early hours of the morning, Hamid’s front door was broken down by an assault squad. The Sunni

leader, his sons and his bodyguards were hooded and dragged off, and furniture throughout his house smashed apart. He was rapidly released once word reached higher authorities and the US military has declared the arrest was a mistake.

The hundreds of others being detained on similar “intelligence” will not be so fortunate. Thousands of Iraqis who have been caught up in US military dragnets over the past two years have been held for three months or more before being released.

In a telling indication of just how little control the occupation forces actually have, the operation is primarily focussed on securing the roads between the fortified Green Zone compound on the western banks of the Tigris River with the airport and Abu Ghraib prison in the western suburbs.

The Green Zone houses the US military command and the Iraqi government, as well as the thousands of contractors, journalists and others who have been drawn to the occupied country. Vehicles travelling to and from the zone are under constant threat of attack by insurgents or roadside bombs. As many as three bombs per day are detonated just on the airport road.

Scattered reports indicate that the scale of violence in Baghdad has dramatically escalated since the offensive began. Heavy clashes took place on Sunday in the suburb of Amariya, which borders the airport road. Some 50 insurgents attacked a checkpoint and an interior ministry detention centre, killing at least nine Iraqi government troops.

Iraqi police have been killed by car bombs and snipers in the working class, predominantly Sunni-populated district of Adhamiya, in Baghdad’s north-west. The suburb has often been compared by journalists with the city of Fallujah, in that it is one of the centres of the Iraqi resistance.

On Tuesday, insurgents ambushed a convoy of the increasingly despised Iraqi police commandos, many of whom were previously special forces troops under Saddam Hussein’s regime and are now working with the US military. Three commandos were killed.

Earlier in the week, suicide bombers drove car bombs into military convoys, checkpoints and the entrance to the Oil Ministry. Yesterday, a car bomb exploded at the checkpoint on the airport road guarding the entrance to one of the main US bases in western Baghdad. At least 15 people were wounded.

Elsewhere in the country, insurgents are believed to have shot down a single-engine plane carrying US special forces, killing four and an Iraqi. An Italian helicopter has also been downed. All four Italian troops on board died in the crash.

Operation Lightning underscores the venal character of the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate Jaafari’s government—Daawa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—and the leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani.

Organised as the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the fundamentalists and Sistani claimed that their victory in the January 30 elections would set in motion the end to US occupation. The basis on which the UIA won the majority of votes from Iraqi Shiites was a promise for a timetable for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Instead, Jaafari’s administration is now functioning as the figure-head for a US-directed reign of terror against Baghdad’s six million citizens, making use of thousands of American troops as well as Iraqi paramilitary units that were assembled by the US military from Saddam Hussein’s regime’s special forces and Republican Guard.



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