US military sinks further into the Iraqi quagmire

Peter Symonds
28 June 2005

By any measure, the US military occupation of Iraq is steadily sinking into a quagmire of Washington's own making. Successive claims by the Bush administration that the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003, the installation of an interim administration last June, national elections in January and the inauguration of the new puppet government of Prime Minister Abrahim al-Jaafari in April would end armed resistance have proven to be completely illusory.

There is no end in sight to the daily attacks on American and allied military personnel, or Iraqi government security forces. In London for talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, al-Jaafari told the press yesterday: "I think two years will be enough, more than enough, to establish security in our country." His remarks reflect both wishful thinking and a rather desperate attempt to retain some credibility with the Shiite supporters who voted for his United Iraqi Alliance because it promised to set a timetable for US military withdrawal.

The raw figures demonstrate the scope of the anti-occupation insurgency. US casualties are running at the highest levels since the January election. In May, 80 US personnel were killed and so far in June another 75 have died—an average of nearly three a day. The number of US deaths for the year to June 27, is 890 and, since the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, the total is 1,740.

The number of attacks by armed insurgents averaged 57 a day for January and February; dropped slightly to 53 a day in March and April, and hit 70 a day in May. Figures are not yet available for June but there is no indication that armed resistance is abating. Over the past two months, 52 Iraqi government, legal and religious officials have been assassinated. At least 1,338 people, including many Iraqi police and army personnel, have been killed since al-Jaafari formed his government on April 28.

The attacks reported over the past few days give an indication of the level of armed conflict. On Monday, a US Apache gunship crashed at Mishahda north of Baghdad killing both pilots. Eyewitnesses said the helicopter was shot down by a rocket. According to Associated Press statistics, there have been 20 fatal helicopter crashes since March 2003, in which 128 people have died.

Yesterday also, a bomb exploded in eastern Baghdad killing at least four people and injuring another 16. Another two people were killed by a roadside bomb in northern Azamiyah neighbourhood.

On Sunday, three suicide bombs killed at least 32 people in the northern city of Mosul. The first blast took place when a pickup truck laden with explosives slammed into a downtown police station, killing at least 10 policemen and two civilians. Two hours later, 16 people lost their lives when a suicide bomber blew himself up outside an Iraqi army base on the city outskirts. The third explosion at the Mosul's Jumhouri Teaching Hospital killed five policemen and injured several others.

Elsewhere in Iraq, another 18 more people were killed on Sunday, including a US soldier whose convoy was hit by a roadside bomb in Baghdad. Six Iraqi soldiers were gunned down outside their base north of the capital. The previous day in Mosul, a suicide car bomb exploded at a police checkpoint, killing five officers and wounding two more.

Last Thursday, a suicide car bomber attacked a US convoy near Fallujah, killing six American troops and injuring at least 13. The US media has focussed on the fact that three of the dead and 11 of the wounded were women, but the site of the attack is more significant. Last November, the US military levelled much of Fallujah and put what remained of the city under tight martial law, yet it has clearly failed to eliminate armed anti-US resistance in the area.

An article on the *New York Times* last week highlighted the difficulties facing US military commanders: "[W]ith recent American troop levels—139,000 now—they have been forced to play an infernal board game, constantly shuttling combat units from one war zone to another, leaving insurgent buildups unmet in some places while they deal with more urgent problems elsewhere...

"High-intensity operations like the one at Fallujah are like driving a stake into a hornets' nest, many American officers say. They scatter the insurgents, who regroup and return as soon as American troop numbers are reduced. Seven months after Fallujah was recaptured, in ruins, pockets of insurgents still operate in the city. Tal Afar, Mosul, Qaim, Haditha, Samarra, Ramadi, Hillah—all have been targets of coalition offensives, only for the insurgents to come back, starting the

© World Socialist Web Site

circle over."

As the article explained, the number of effective combat troops is far smaller than the overall totals. "American commanders, their army bottom-heavy with support units, have at most 60,000 American and allied combat soldiers available, and only a fraction as many Iraqi soldiers rated combat-ready."

On paper, the number of Iraqi police and soldiers, as of this month, is more than 168,000. But these forces, on which the Pentagon is depending to play a larger role, are unreliable and infiltrated by resistance members.

An article in last week's *Newsweek* magazine entitled "Enemy Spies" highlighted the fact that the Iraqi security forces have "hundreds of 'ghost soldiers' who vanish, sometimes for months on end, but continue to draw their pay." The fear that these "ghost soldiers" have connections to the insurgency was confirmed when a recruit to the notorious Wolf Brigade, who had gone AWOL, walked into the elite unit's heavily-protected headquarters in Baghdad on June 11 and blew himself up. Three brigade members were killed and a dozen others were wounded.

At least 176 Iraqi police have been directly implicated in recent car bombings—their fingerprints were found on bomb debris. According to Security Minister Abdul Karim al-Inizi, that is only a fraction of the total number of infiltrators. "A number way bigger than that is still active and still in service," he told *Newsweek*. Referring to the recruitment of former members of Saddam Hussein's hated Mukhabarat intelligence service, he added: "They penetrated easily because [the] government brought them back without asking enough questions."

According to US estimates, its forces killed 15,000 insurgents over the past year, but the figure for the strength of the insurgency remains about the same—between 12,000 and 20,000. An unnamed Special Operations source told the magazine, only 1,000 of the insurgents were foreign fighters and the rest were Iraqis, who could count on "as many as 400,000 auxiliaries and support personnel". He indicated that there were at least 40 distinct resistance groups which at times combined forces for joint operations.

The US is continuing to mount repressive sweeps through areas thought to be sympathetic to the insurgency. The arbitrary killing and detention of "suspected insurgents" only fuels anger and hostility that provides more recruits to the armed resistance groups. One indication of the size and scope of such operations is the fact that the US military has been compelled to expand the capacity of the jails under its control to make room for more and more detainees.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* on June 26 revealed that as of last Saturday the prisoner total in June stood at 10,783 on average, up from 7,837 in January and 5,435 in June 2004. Major General William Brandenburg, who oversees US-run prisons in Iraq, told the newspaper: "Business is booming". Not only has the Pentagon been compelled to abandon plans to hand over Abu Ghraib prison to Iraqi authorities, but is preparing to spend $50 million to expand overall jail capacity to 16,000 prisoners.

The main two US-run prisons—Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca—are operating near their limits. So volatile are the prisons that US authorities are constantly on the watch for potential unrest. Two major riots have broken out in Camp Bucca over the last six months. On January 31, guards used live ammunition to break up a riot, killing four inmates. The vast majority of the prisoners are Iraqis and only a small fraction—about 1,600 detainees over more than two years—have been sent to the Iraqi court system.

Confronted with the failure to suppress the insurgency, US and Iraqi officials are attempting to split the opposition. An article in the London-based *Times* on June 26 provided details of a meeting between US officials and insurgent leaders at a villa north of Baghdad. It included representatives of Ansar al-Sunna, which claimed responsibility for killing 22 people in the dining hall of a US base at Mosul last Christmas. The US group included senior American military and intelligence officers, an embassy official and a Congressional staff member.

US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld acknowledged that the meeting, and "probably many more", had taken place, but refused to confirm any details and downplayed its significance. There was every reason for Rumsfeld to dismiss the *Times* article, which confirmed that such efforts have been a complete failure. While US intelligence officers unsuccessfully attempted to wheedle information from those present, the insurgent leaders insisted that all they were interested in talking about was a withdrawal date for US forces.

One response in Washington to the deteriorating military situation is to demand a beefing up of the US military presence in Iraq—more soldiers, more gunships and more repression to cow a hostile population. Whatever its immediate and temporary successes, such a strategy would inevitably generate more hostility and provoke broader overt opposition—armed and otherwise—to what is an illegal neo-colonial occupation aimed at subjugating the oil-rich country to US economic and strategic interests.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site