

Bush administration deploys thousands more troops in Baghdad

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In what was a tacit admission that previous efforts to consolidate its occupation of Iraq had failed, the Bush administration last week announced the deployment of more than 4,000 additional US soldiers in Baghdad. The latest tactical shift paves the way for a dramatic intensification of repression and violence against the Iraqi people and a surge in casualties among American soldiers.

President George Bush announced the decision on July 25, following a meeting in Washington with the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki. “Our strategy is to remain on the offence, including in Baghdad,” he declared. “Coalition and Iraqi forces will secure individual neighbourhoods, will ensure the existence of an Iraqi security presence in the neighbourhoods, and gradually expand the security presence as Iraqi citizens help them root out those who instigate violence.”

Bush’s announcement was issued with his administration’s usual combination of cynicism and blatant dishonesty. An increased US military presence in Iraq’s capital was presented as a means of assisting the Iraqi people and defending the “democratic” national government.

In reality, however, the additional US forces are being sent to Baghdad to suppress the resistance of ordinary Iraqis to the foreign occupation and to prop up the US-installed puppet regime headed by Maliki, as sectarian violence escalates.

Washington’s decision to send an additional 4,000 troops into the capital itself demonstrates the weakness of the Iraqi government, which is widely despised as an instrument of the occupying powers and which would immediately collapse if the American-led troops were withdrawn. The additional forces will join the 9,000 American soldiers and 8,500 Iraqi troops already stationed in Baghdad.

After Maliki was installed as prime minister in April, he announced a new strategy for dealing with resistance activity and sectarian fighting. “Operation Forward Together” saw a series of repressive measures enforced by US troops and their Iraqi proxies in the army and police. Roadblocks were erected throughout Baghdad, slowing traffic to a crawl,

while checkpoints encircled the city in an effort to cut off insurgents from neighbouring bases of support. Night curfews were also enforced and vehicle movements restricted.

The crackdown was hailed by the Bush administration as a welcome development following the installation of a so-called national unity government headed by Maliki. Washington cobbled together a highly unstable alliance of Kurdish nationalists, Shiite sectarian parties, and a number of Sunni organisations and promoted it as yet another “turning point” for Iraq. The coalition government would supposedly work with the occupying forces to defuse communalist tensions and bolster the Iraqi military and police forces, allowing the Bush administration to withdraw some of its forces from the country ahead of the US mid-term elections in November.

None of this has eventuated. Instead, the Maliki government has been wrought by inner tensions, a symptom of sharpening sectarian conflict, and the crisis facing the occupying forces has intensified. American troops continued to be killed and wounded by roadside bombs and other guerrilla attacks, and the numbers of Sunni and Shiite victims of sectarian conflict continued to skyrocket. Nearly 2,600 American soldiers have now died in the war, while the number of Iraqi civilian deaths continues to escalate at the hands of both the US-led occupying forces and the sectarian militias and death squads. According to United Nations figures, about 6,000 Iraqis, or 100 a day, were killed in sectarian or political violence in May and June.

In classic colonial-style fashion, Washington’s response to the mounting crisis is to intensify repression of the local population. The additional 4,000 American troops being dispatched to Baghdad will be joined by an equivalent number of Iraqi soldiers drawn from different areas of the country. US soldiers will be deployed in the city’s police stations and alongside senior officers, in an attempt to stem sectarian rivalries within the country’s security forces.

The US and Iraqi troops are supposed to enforce a so-called “inkblot strategy” in Baghdad, whereby specific

neighbourhoods and sectors in the capital are made the focus of house raids and security sweeps, and other areas are effectively abandoned to anti-occupation forces. The theory goes that once certain areas are secured, the “inkblot” of control will spread to cover the entire city and country.

While this is publicly presented as a military strategy, it is an implicit recognition that more than three years after the fall of Baghdad, US-led forces and the puppet Iraqi regime are still unable to control vast swathes of the country, including the capital.

In its attempt to secure Baghdad, the Bush administration has been forced to move troops from other areas of Iraq where its control is, to say the least, tenuous. Some of the 4,000 troops will be drawn from Anbar province, which includes the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, and is the centre of the Sunni-led resistance. Eight marines have been killed in the province in the last four days. Other forces will be redeployed from the northern city of Mosul, which has been a focus of sectarian fighting between Kurdish and Sunni forces. US troops stationed in Germany and Kuwait have also been recently sent into Iraq.

The boosting of troop numbers in Baghdad will place further strains on an already overstretched US military. The latest redeployment will boost the total number of US troops in the country from the current 127,000 to more than 130,000. As the situation continues to worsen for Washington, the Bush administration’s desire to withdraw a limited number of troops ahead of US congressional elections has been dashed.

Anthony Cordesman of the Centre for Strategic International Studies told the *New York Times* that any troop pullout in the next few months “would be so cosmetic that it would be meaningless. It would be statistical gamesmanship. People are talking about 2009 as the goal for achieving really serious security.”

Thousands of soldiers who were scheduled to leave Iraq in the next few weeks have had their tours of duty extended by up to four months. Most of those forced to remain in Iraq are from the 3,500-strong 172nd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, which is currently stationed in Mosul. The soldiers were preparing to return home when the order to remain was signed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Major Kirk Gohlke, an army spokesman, later admitted that the news had provoked anger. “The families and the soldiers are human,” he declared. “They reacted the way anyone would react.”

The US military is already facing a crisis of morale in Iraq. Tens of thousands of troops have been affected by extended tours of duty and cancelled leave, others have been issued with stop-loss orders preventing them from leaving the military, and countless National Guardsmen, often poorly

trained and equipped, have been deployed in Iraq for lengthy periods.

A *Washington Post* report last Thursday, entitled “Waiting to get blown up”, provided an insight into the increasing disillusionment and hostility towards the war within the ranks of the US military.

The newspaper interviewed soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, who patrol the streets of Baghdad. Each infantryman in the capital conducts about 10 patrols a week, for a total of between 50 to 60 hours. The 750-man battalion, which entered Iraq in March, has suffered 6 deaths and 21 injuries.

“It sucks,” Spec. Tim Ivey said. “Honestly, it just feels like we’re driving around waiting to get blown up. That’s the most honest answer I could give you. You lose a couple of friends and it gets hard.”

“No one wants to be here, you know, no one is truly enthused about what we do,” Sgt. Christopher Dugger, the squad leader, told the *Washington Post*. “We were excited but then it just wears on you—there’s only so much you can take. Like me, personally, I want to fight in a war like World War II. I want to fight an enemy. And this, out here, there is no enemy, it’s a faceless enemy.”

The frustration of not being able to distinguish an enemy in an environment where the majority of the people are hostile to the US forces and doubts about the war itself were repeated themes among the soldiers interviewed.

“[In] World War II the big picture was clear—you know you’re fighting because somebody was trying to take over the world, basically,” 22-year-old medic David Fulcher said. “This is like, what did we invade here for? How did it become, ‘Well now we have to rebuild this place from the ground up’?”

“They say we’re here and we’ve given them freedom, but really what is that? You know, what is freedom? You’ve got kids here who can’t go to school. You’ve got people here who don’t have jobs anymore. You’ve got people here who don’t have power. You know, so yeah, they’ve got freedom now, but when they didn’t have freedom, everybody had a job.”



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