

Pentagon report on Iraq reveals a deepening catastrophe

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The Pentagon report to the US Congress on August 29 provided a frank assessment of the sectarian and communal divisions that have been fomented since the 2003 US invasion. The report stated that the fratricidal conflict between rival Sunni and Shiite Muslim movements for control over regions of the country had created “the conditions that could lead to civil war”. At the same time, it acknowledged that the anti-occupation insurgency in majority Sunni areas will “likely continue to attack coalition forces while they remain in Iraq”.

Previous US claims that the formation of a cabinet by the new prime minister, Shiite leader Nouri al-Maliki, would stabilise Iraq, proved to be unfounded. Since May 20, the report declared, there had been “an increasing number of execution-style killings, kidnappings and attacks on civilians, and increasing numbers of internally displaced persons”.

The Pentagon’s statistics are horrifying. At least 2,000 Iraqis are being slaughtered each month in what the US military classifies as “sectarian incidents”. In Baghdad, 90 percent of the more than 1,800 corpses processed by the coroner’s office in July had been executed. The report cited UN estimates that 137,000 people had fled their homes due to the sectarian violence. The bulk of the displacement was taking place “on the boundaries of the mixed and ethnically dominated areas of Baghdad and in southwestern Diyala province”. Violence was also growing, however, in the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk where Kurdish claims over territory and resources had heightened communal tensions.

The number of known attacks on US and foreign troops, the Iraqi security forces, civilians or infrastructure increased by 15 percent over the past three months to close to 800 per week. Over 60 percent were directed against US and ISF targets. Civilians were the targets of just 15 percent of attacks, but constituted the majority of the victims of the violence. Close to 120 Iraqis were killed or wounded every day, as well as nearly 20 US and other foreign personnel.

Amid this carnage, the social conditions facing Iraqis are disastrous. Unemployment is estimated by one agency at 18 percent, and underemployment at another 34 percent. At least 15.4 percent of the population “lacks adequate food”, according to the UN World Food Program. As many as 25.9 percent of children are afflicted with severe or moderate

stunting in their physical growth. Inflation over the year from June 2005 to June 2006 was 52.5 percent. Residents of Baghdad still only receive an average of eight hours of electricity per day.

Polling data from Iraq cited by the Pentagon indicates that “public perceptions are generally more pessimistic than they were a year ago”. A majority of people fear that a full-scale civil war is likely to break out.

The report noted that communities are increasingly looking to ethno-sectarian militias for protection. In Shiite areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq, the report noted that the Mahdi Army militia of Moqtada al-Sadr “is well known and popularly supported”. The growing backing for Sadr stems in large part from the total failure of the US occupation forces to prevent the constant attacks on Shiite civilians, as well as the preparedness of factions within the Mahdi Army to carry out revenge attacks against Sunni extremists and the efforts of the Sadrist movement to provide social services and welfare to the urban poor and victims of violence.

In the Kurdish northern provinces, the Kurdish regional government and the nationalist *peshmerga* militia are regarded as the main guarantor of security—not the Iraqi government or military.

In largely Sunni areas of western and central Iraq, there is overwhelming hostility toward the Maliki government and distrust of the Iraqi security forces. Sunni communities have come to regard the Iraqi police forces as little more than potential Shiite death squads. The Pentagon referred at various points to the influence within the Ministry of the Interior police and the regular Iraqi police of the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organisation militia of the Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The report repeatedly blamed “rogue elements” of the Mahdi Army for a large proportion of the sectarian killings.

The report also noted that the new Iraqi military is permeated with communal divisions. The majority of commanders of the 114 battalions in the US-recruited Iraqi Army “command only soldiers of their own sectarian or regional background”. The majority of the government troops are Shiite and Kurdish, many of whom are former members of sectarian militias and have little loyalty to the Baghdad government.

Summing up the “security environment” in Iraq, the Pentagon report concluded: “Rising sectarian strife defines the emerging nature of violence in mid-2006... the core conflict in Iraq changed into a struggle between Sunni and Shia extremists seeking to control key areas in Baghdad, create or protect sectarian enclaves, divert economic resources, and impose their own respective political and religious agendas.” Sustained ethno-sectarian violence, the report declared, “is the greatest threat to security and stability in Iraq”.

US imperialism, however, has no solution to the communal catastrophe it has created. Instead, the Bush administration and American media are using the Pentagon report to justify preparations for stepped-up operations by the US military and the Iraqi government forces against the Sadrist movement and its Mahdi Army militia.

The Sadrists are viewed as a threat in Washington not because of any particular role they have in sectarian attacks, but because their supporters among the Shiite working class and urban poor in areas like Sadr City in Baghdad are hostile to both the occupation of Iraq and the broader US aggression in the Middle East. In July, tens of thousands of Iraqi Shiites demonstrated in the Iraqi capital against the Israeli assault on Lebanon. Sadrist leaders have also declared that the Mahdi Army will fight in defence of Iran if it is the target of US attack.

Within days of the Pentagon report being released, Iraqi government troops, backed by US aircraft, were ordered to attack an alleged “rogue” cell of the Mahdi Army in the city of Diwaniyah, to the south of Baghdad. Dozens of troops and militiamen were killed in what was widely regarded as a dress rehearsal for an assault on Sadr City. The *New York Times* editorialised on September 1 that “Mr Maliki’s refusal to go after the main stronghold—Sadr City—helps explain Baghdad’s continued high level of violence”. Preparations are now underway for a major US-government operation into the district, ostensibly to crack down on Shiite death squads.

No section of the US ruling elite dwells on how or why sectarianism has come to define life in Iraq—for obvious reasons. The fundamental causes are the policies and methods of the US occupation. The invasion in 2003 was consciously aimed at destroying the existing state and shattering national institutions such as the army and public service that provided the base of support for the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. The US-backed governments that have been formed since have rested on Kurdish and Shiite parties who have collaborated with the US invasion primarily from the standpoint of wresting economic and political power from the traditional Sunni ruling elite.

The new constitution imposed on the country by the US occupation last year set the stage for civil war. It established the mechanisms for the partition of Iraq into ethno-sectarian regions. In the north of the country, the Kurdish nationalist parties are pushing forward with plans to expand their

“regional” government to include ethnically mixed cities such as Kirkuk and Iraq’s largest northern oilfields. Over the next several months, provincial elections will be held in which sections of the Shiite elite in the south will call for the formation of a Shiite “region” that would take control over the even larger southern oilfields.

Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish organisations are waging brutal campaigns to secure control over as much territory as they can. The operations of the death squads and militias in Baghdad—a mixed city of close to six million—are to some extent aimed at dividing the city into homogenous Sunni and Shiite areas. Associated Press commented on September 3: “A new but not better city is emerging. Many Iraqis fear that the result will be a Sunni west and a Shiite east, with the broad Tigris River snaking through the middle as the sectarian boundary.” Similar ethnic cleansing is occurring in mixed Kurdish and Arab cities such as Kirkuk and Mosul.

The US occupation forces are, in the main, simply standing by as this process takes place. Partition of the country, in fact, continues to be called for by leading American analysts as a means of securing US interests. Last month, Michael O’Hanlon, one of the leading foreign policy commentators for the Brookings Institution, advocated that the US occupation openly adopt a policy of “actively facilitating voluntary ethnic segregation” in Iraq. “If we can encourage future ethnic relocation to occur voluntarily and peacefully”, Hanlon wrote, “rather than through murder, rape and intimidation, we can still salvage an imperfect but real success that ultimately leaves most Iraqis better off than they were under Hussein”.

Such proposals serve only to underscore the basic truth of the US invasion. The primary objective was long-term dominance over Iraq’s oil resources and territory and the subjugation of its population. If achieving that aim meant hundreds of thousands of people being killed or forced from their homes as the country divided into three or more mini-states, US imperialism would have no hesitation in implementing such a plan.



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