

US casualties soar as military intensifies violence in Baghdad

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The worst three-day period for US forces in the greater Baghdad area since the beginning of the Iraq war has driven the American casualty total up sharply. Thirteen US soldiers were killed in the Iraqi capital Monday through Wednesday, and a total of 23 died throughout Iraq in the first four days of October, according to fragmentary reports from US military sources given to the American press.

Eight US soldiers were killed on Monday alone in Baghdad, the worst one-day total in 15 months. Other deaths include five Marines killed in Anbar Province, a British soldier killed in Basra, and four more deaths in Baghdad on Wednesday morning.

The deaths in Baghdad are directly bound up with the influx into the Iraqi capital of US troops as part of an offensive launched by the Pentagon to suppress sectarian militias and forestall the breakup of the puppet regime of Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki.

This is a brutal action, with American troops going door-to-door in targeted neighborhoods, breaking down doors and arresting alleged militia members. Very little has been reported about the offensive, and no figures have been released of Iraqi dead and wounded, or the number arrested. However, ABC News noted Thursday night that US forces have raided 100,000 buildings over the past two months.

Eight of the 13 deaths in Baghdad were attributed to small arms fire rather than improvised explosive devices, the leading killer of American soldiers in Iraq. A US Army spokesman, Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, told the press, “When you’re conducting operations and you’ve doubled the number of troops doing operations in Baghdad, there is more opportunity—as there is much more activity as they go into more neighborhoods—for attacks to occur and casualties to result.” He said insurgents “are reacting to an opportunity to attack.”

According to a report Wednesday in the *Times*, “US military deaths appear to be rising, even as fatalities among Iraqi security forces have fallen... As American fatalities increased, the number of deaths among Iraqi security forces fell in September to 150, the lowest number since June and among the lowest tallies in 18 months, according to the Brookings Institution Iraq Index.”

These figures demonstrate the failure of the Bush administration’s policy of shifting front-line military responsibilities to the troops and police of the US-installed regime in Baghdad headed by Maliki. With Iraqi troops either unable or unwilling to conduct the type of brutal counterinsurgency sweeps demanded in densely populated Baghdad neighborhoods, more than 15,000 American troops have been mobilized to carry out the dirty work—and take the ensuing casualties.

In addition to the small arms fire encountered in the house-to-house searches, the number of bombs planted is “at an all-time high,” according to another military spokesman, Maj. Gen. William B. Caldwell. “This has been a hard week for US forces,” he admitted.

Army Maj. Gen. James D. Thurman, commander of the Multinational Division Baghdad, told the *Times* last month that attacks against US-led coalition forces in Baghdad had reached an average of 42 a day—with about six causing casualties or equipment damage—up from 36 or 38 attacks. “Why are we seeing an increase in attacks?” he said. “Well, we have twice as many forces operating throughout the city now. We’re challenging the anti-Iraqi forces where they live and operate.”

In the bizarre terminology of the Pentagon, Iraqi insurgents—people who, as General Thurman admits, “live and operate” in Baghdad and fight against the Americans who have come 10,000 miles to occupy the

country—are described as “anti-Iraqi forces.”

Meanwhile, the Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr, whose political movement dominates the eastern half of Baghdad, issued a warning that he and his Mahdi Army militia were the likely next target for a massive US military onslaught. A top aide to al-Sadr, Sahib al-Amery, said Wednesday that a US attack on Sadr City, the main Shiite area on east side of Baghdad, was imminent.

“They want to turn it into mass graves similar to the previous ones conducted by the former regime,” al-Amery said. “The occupation forces want to start a sectarian crisis on the pretext that there are Shiite militias.”

US officials have issued a steady drumbeat of statements criticizing the Maliki government for not moving against al-Sadr’s organization and against another big Shiite militia, the Badr Brigade, controlled by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, one of the two main components of the ruling Shiite bloc that controls a majority of seats in parliament.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice flew to Baghdad Wednesday for talks with Maliki. Her trip, not announced in advance, was a manifestation of the deepening crisis of the US occupation regime. Rice’s landing at the Baghdad International Airport had to be delayed by 30 minutes because of mortar fire near the facility.

Her trip was largely aimed at stepping up the pressure on Maliki and his government to support and participate in an attack on al-Sadr’s forces.

She arrived in the Iraqi capital barely 24 hours after the Iraqi Interior Ministry suspended an entire Iraqi police brigade after charges that it had permitted or directly participated in sectarian death-squad killings. Members of the brigade were alleged to have taken part in a raid on a meatpacking plant in which 24 workers were seized and presumably executed. The bodies of seven of the kidnapped workers were found the next day.

According to the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, which monitors deaths reported by the US military, 74 soldiers and Marines were killed in Iraq in September, the highest number since April, when 76 died. The death toll diminished during the summer, at least in part because of a deliberate decision by the Pentagon to

scale back the number of American patrols, which, according to the *New York Times*, are down from a daily average of 400 in 2005 to only 100 a day this year.

It is quite likely that this decision was taken for political, not military reasons—to prevent the US death toll from hitting the 3,000 mark during the critical last two months of the 2006 election campaign. Total US deaths in Iraq are nearing 2,750. If American soldiers had died at September’s rate throughout the summer, the death toll would have hit 3,000 only days before the November 7 vote.

A preliminary analysis of the September deaths, prepared by the *Washington Post*’s web site, found that the 70 soldiers for whom biographical information was available came from 31 states and two US territories (Puerto Rico and Micronesia). There were 67 men and three women.

In terms of states, the largest number of deaths, six, was among Ohio soldiers, followed by five each from California and Texas, four from Florida, and three apiece from Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania and Washington.

The tragic waste of lives—a tragedy multiplied a hundredfold in terms of Iraqi war dead—is underscored when one considers the age at which these soldiers were killed. One was only 18 years old, five were 19, 9 were 20 years old, and 13 were 21 years old (the most common age). Three were in their 50s, the oldest of whom was 57.

The ongoing slaughter testifies to the bipartisan support for the continuation of the war. No prominent Democrat has criticized the intensification of US violence in Baghdad. On the contrary, many of the Democratic critics of the Bush administration have combined complaints about the government’s incompetence and its strategic blunders with calls for more troops and more decisive military action to crush the Iraqi resistance.



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