

US military and Iraqi deaths soar amidst preparations for major offensive

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Ten US troops died on Tuesday in Iraq and at least one more on Wednesday, bringing the monthly death toll for October up to 70. At the current rate, US casualties for the month will be the highest since November 2004, and the third highest since the invasion in March 2003. The latest surge in casualties brings the total US death toll to at least 2,786.

The increased death rate comes as the American military has stepped up efforts to repress the Iraqi insurgency, particularly the Shiite population in the capital. Five of the fatalities from Tuesday and Wednesday were in or around Baghdad, including five soldiers killed in two separate roadside bombs, and another killed by gunfire. Other deaths took place in Diyala, north of the capital, and in the predominantly Sunni Anbar province in western Iraq.

Iraqi deaths are also up sharply, including those killed by occupation forces and those killed in escalating sectarian violence. According to an Associated Press count, which certainly underestimates the number of Iraqi deaths, 767 Iraqis have been killed in war-related violence so far this month, or 45 per day. At the current rate, October will be the deadliest month since the AP began keeping count in April 2005.

Most Iraqi deaths, however, go unreported and therefore would not be included in the AP figures. A report released earlier this month—published in the British medical journal *Lancet* and produced by a team at Johns Hopkins University—estimated that 600,000 Iraqis have been killed in war-related violence since March 2003, which would amount to about 500 every day. The *Lancet* report also found that the number of deaths has been steadily increasing, meaning that the current mortality rate is likely to be much higher than this number.

This carnage is a product of an escalating US warfare with Iraqi resistance fighters, combined with increasingly sharp divisions within rival factions of the Iraqi elite, which is taking the form of sectarian killings. In Balad, a city north of Baghdad, 100 Iraqis were killed or disappeared over the weekend, amidst execution-style killings. The violence began on Friday, when 19 Shiites were abducted and beheaded. This was followed by apparently arbitrary reprisals by Shiite militias against Sunni Muslims.

At the same time, the US military is preparing to move

sharply against Shiite militias, which could produce a bloodbath far greater than the current level of violence. The Bush administration is pressuring the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to support a major assault on the Shiite militia of Moqtada al-Sadr. These preparations, and Maliki's reservations, were revealed in an interview Maliki gave to *USA Today* on Friday.

The newspaper reported that Maliki "has rejected US plans to launch large-scale operations in Sadr City, a Baghdad slum and stronghold" of Sadr's Mahdi Army.

"We have told the Americans that we don't mind targeting a Mahdi Army cell inside Sadr City," Maliki said. "But the way the multinational forces are thinking of confronting this issue will destroy an entire neighborhood."

Maliki's comments are significant for what they reveal about American plans to "destroy an entire neighborhood." Such an operation would parallel previous attempts to gain control of predominantly Sunni areas such as Fallujah by leveling an entire city and decimating its population. While they have not been revealed publicly, these plans are clearly known to Maliki and preparations to implement them have already begun.

There is a truly criminal character to this entire enterprise, which has produced an unimaginable catastrophe for the Iraqi people and a tragic squandering of lives of American soldiers. Over three-and-a-half years after the invasion, the American military is still attempting to secure its control over the population and natural resources of Iraq through a fresh round of brutal killing.

Maliki's statements are also revealing of the extraordinary tensions building up between the current Iraqi government and the American occupation forces. Maliki's decision to give the interview was clearly calculated to warn the American government against what he considers to be a disastrous policy, one that will undermine his own base of power and likely lead to his replacement by someone not so closely tied to the Shiite militias.

The Bush administration and sections of the US military now see the Shiite militias, particularly the organization headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, as the principal obstacle to establishing a government in Iraq that will carry out the demands of the occupying forces. While he has collaborated with the

occupation and supported the Maliki government, Sadr's base of support is among impoverished and working class layers of the Shiite population who are intensely opposed to the American military presence.

The demands from Washington are creating enormous problems for Maliki, since Sadr controls one of the largest blocs in the Iraqi parliament supporting Maliki's government.

With the tacit approval of Washington, Shiite militias have been largely integrated into the state, particularly in the Interior Ministry, which includes the police apparatus. Much of the sectarian killings have been carried out by members of the Iraqi police, or with their approval.

Now the Bush administration is shifting strategy, and demanding that Maliki follow through. An article in the *New York Times* on Tuesday spelled out the current thinking within the American establishment. Maliki, the newspaper reported, "has come under intense American pressure to purge Iraq's security forces of the militias and death squads that operate within their ranks."

"Another serious problem for American officials," the newspaper reported, "is Mr. Maliki's refusal to allow a major crackdown on Mr. Sadr's militia, the Mahdi Army. This has been a long-smoldering issue for the Americans, who faced two uprisings by the Shiite militia in April and August 2004, only to have Mr. Sadr escape outright defeat when Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most powerful Shiite cleric in Iraq, intervened, allowing Mr. Sadr to keep large parts of his militia intact." These background comments by American officials to the *Times* were no doubt intended in part as a response to Maliki's earlier interview with *USA Today*.

Pressure on Maliki has resulted in his decision to remove two top officials in the Special Police, both Shiites.

Also on Tuesday, in another sign of increasing tensions, American forces arrested a top aide to Sadr, Sheik Mazin al-Saedi, who is described by the *Times* as "the head of Mr. Sadr's office in the poor Shiite neighborhood of Shuala" in Baghdad. Saedi was released on Wednesday after protests from Maliki and discussions between the prime minister, Sistani and Sadr.

The escalating crisis in Iraq, and the American government's reaction, makes a mockery of Iraqi "democracy," which has never been anything more than a means through which the occupying forces have sought to solidify their control. Sadr's organization currently holds 30 seats in the parliament, as well as several cabinet posts. It gained these posts in the much-touted "democratic" elections in 2005. However, this has not stopped American forces from talking openly about destroying the organization.

There are also growing signs that the US is preparing an open breach with Maliki and his replacement by some sort of military junta or "strongman" to carry out US demands. There is some indication that the US might turn again to former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who returned to Iraq this week for the

first time in months. While head of the "Iraqi Interim Government" from May 2004 to April 2005, Allawi supported the American assault on Fallujah and Najaf. While in exile after breaking with Saddam Hussein, he spent many years on the CIA's payroll.

Debates within the American ruling elite over what to do about the Iraq occupation are being carried out largely behind the backs of the American population. While it is broadly acknowledged within the government and policy think tanks that a major shift is necessary—including a crackdown on Shiite insurgents—a final move is being deliberately put off until after the November elections, now three weeks away.

There is, once again, a deliberate attempt to exclude opposition to the Iraq occupation from the framework of political debate, under conditions in which the war is extremely unpopular. A recent CNN poll, conducted over the weekend, found that 64 percent of the US population opposes the war in Iraq.

This conspiracy against the American and Iraqi people has been carried out with the complicity of both the Democrats and Republicans. The entire political establishment in the United States supports the basic premises of the Iraq occupation. Disputes—within the Republican Party and between the Democrats and Republicans—are entirely concerned with tactical decisions on how best to defend the interests of American imperialism.

The Democratic Party is seeking to align itself with sections of the military that have long complained that the Iraq occupation has been a disaster because there are not enough troops on the ground. A series of books written by Democratic Party figures have advocated a form of "universal citizen service"—a military draft in different language.

To cite one example, Rahm Emanuel, a member of the House of Representatives and chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and Bruce Reed, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, advocate in their book *The Plan* a program in which all Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 will engage in "three months of basic training, civil defense preparation and community service." Such a program would serve as a precursor to mandatory military service for all American youth.

These plans are being developed in response to the growing strains of the Iraq occupation, as well as plans for military intervention in Iran or North Korea. They will mean more American youth being supplied as cannon fodder to carry out the demands of American imperialism.



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