

US offensive in Baghdad begins surge of killing and repression

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The escalation of the Iraq war that was outlined by US President Bush on Wednesday night is already well underway. Beginning last Saturday, Iraqi government and US forces have pursued an operation to dislodge anti-occupation resistance fighters from Haifa Street—a major thoroughfare in the heart of Baghdad that follows the west bank of the Tigris River and leads into the “Green Zone” area where the US embassy and offices of the Iraqi government are housed.

A full offensive into the district was carried out on Tuesday. What followed makes clear that the “surge” of US and Iraqi government troops into Baghdad is a prescription for mass killing and repression.

Haifa is a predominantly Sunni Arab neighbourhood and the street itself is lined with high-rise offices and the apartments and homes of former public servants and army officers of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime, who were deprived of their jobs and social position by the US invasion. The poorer, working class backstreets have been described by American troops as a “labyrinth” of winding alleys and crumbling homes, and a “perfect place for insurgents who need cover”.

As armed resistance to the US occupation grew throughout 2003, the area became known as one of the most dangerous in Baghdad. While repeated raids have been made and hundreds of locals killed or detained, the US military has thus far failed to terrorise the populace into submission. As soon as American forces have withdrawn from the area, guerilla cells have reformed and resumed their insurgency.

The current operation in Haifa Street, in line with the broader aim of Bush’s surge, is aimed at using overwhelming force to finally suppress opposition. After three days of probing by poorly equipped Iraqi forces—which appear to have been mainly used as cannon fodder to determine the location of insurgents—American troops in Stryker armoured vehicles, supported by F-18 fighter-bombers and Apache helicopter gunships, spearheaded a dawn assault.

Some 1,000 troops were used to secure less than two kilometres of the thoroughfare. Resistance began immediately after US and government forces seized Tala’a Square at the northern end of Haifa Street and began moving south, smashing into homes and offices on both sides of the road and searching for alleged insurgents. By 6:30 a.m., they were being engaged by Iraqi fighters equipped with only small arms, rocket-propelled grenades and mortars.

The tactics employed by the American commanders against the Iraqi resistance provide a glimpse of what will be carried on a far greater scale as US forces implement Bush’s new plan. American troops made no attempt to storm buildings from which they were taking fire. Instead—in the middle of an urban area where civilians were given no warning of an assault—helicopter gunships and Strykers raked offices and houses with heavy machine guns, while alleged insurgent firing positions were blown apart by Hellcat missiles fired from the air or by anti-tank missiles and grenades launched from the ground.

The top of buildings where snipers were believed to be located were strafed by F-15 and F-18 jet fighters, which flew over the capital until the early afternoon, as US and Iraqi troops went house-to-house approximately 1.6 kilometres down the street. American aircraft directly fired on a mosque and an ancient cemetery, alleging insurgents were hiding out in them.

The US and Iraqi government forces suffered no fatalities or serious injuries. At least 50 insurgents were reportedly killed and another 21 detained. According to officials, no Iraqi civilians were killed in the barrage of bullets and explosions. There has been no independent verification of this claim. An Iraqi man told Reuters at the mosque where many of the bodies were brought that the dead were “all innocent civilians”. The majority of the guerilla fighters most likely blended into the populace or shifted to safe havens in other parts of the city.

In the aftermath of the assault, military positions have been established in Haifa Street, challenging guerillas to engage the occupation forces and thereby give away their location. The Iraqi government troops are being used as the bait. They are being sent out on patrols and searches, while American forces wait to respond to any attack with massive firepower.

In Ramadi, the capital of the western Iraqi province of Anbar, marine commanders adopted this tactic last year. It has made the marines and their Iraqi collaborators constant targets. More than one third of American casualties occurred in the province. The fighting has become a vicious urban war of attrition, as US troops responded to attacks with brutal retaliation. Many of the buildings surrounding the marine positions throughout the city have been reduced to rubble.

Such tactics, however, are in line with the counter-insurgency manual authored by General David Petraeus, the officer appointed by Bush this month as the new chief of American forces in Iraq and who will preside over the “surge”. Petraeus advocates putting

US troops in bases directly in insurgent strongholds and converting the areas into what US planners have already christened “gated communities”.

A military official told the *Los Angeles Times* on Wednesday: “You can create gated communities because the population wants them, because the population wants to feel secure. Or you can create them to control the population and its movements and make it more difficult for insurgents to operate. That is the theory behind it.” In Iraq, where the vast majority of the population wants US forces out of the country, control is the objective.

In formulating the “gated communities” plan, Petraeus and his staff drew inspiration from tactics that were used during other brutal colonial wars, such as the French counter-insurgency in Algeria, the British occupation of Northern Ireland and the US policy of “strategic hamlets” in Vietnam.

Effectively, entire areas of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities are to be turned into concentration camps. The local community will endure constant military repression. All entry points into the area are sealed off with checkpoints or barricades, residents are issued with identity cards, their movement restricted and their homes subjected to regular searches to prevent guerillas re-establishing a presence.

There is no doubt that over coming weeks and months, Petraeus’s mission is to extend this policy into areas of the predominantly Shiite working class suburb of Sadr City, which has a population of over two million. In a desperate and reckless attempt to put Iraq firmly under US domination, the Bush administration has made clear it is seeking to destroy the political movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and its large Mahdi Army militia.

The Bush administration and US military accuse the Mahdi Army of being the main Shiite protagonist in the murderous sectarian violence taking place between rival Sunni and Shiite extremists. The primary concern in Washington, however, is that the Sadrist movement—the largest Shiite faction in the Iraqi parliament—is building mass support by opposing the US perspective of long-term neo-colonial rule over Iraq. While it has not called for armed resistance to the US occupation since it led two Shiite uprisings in 2004, it has now withdrawn from the government to protest against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s meeting with Bush last November in Jordan.

Sadr is insisting on a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops, opposing any opening up of the oil industry to foreign companies and calling for measures to improve the horrific living conditions of the Iraqi people. It is predicted the Sadrists would win a substantial vote in any election held in Shiite areas of the country. As the Bush administration steps up its provocations against the Shiite regime in Iran, the Mahdi Army is also viewed in US military circles as a considerable and growing threat. The militia consists of up to 60,000 fighters and effectively controls entire units of the Iraqi security forces. Sadr has pledged it will fight to defend Iran if it is attacked by Israel or the United States.

The US claim that the current military plans are the work of the Iraqi government is belied by the fact that Maliki, concerned at the reaction of his Shiite political base, has repeatedly rejected Washington’s demands that he sanction an attack on the Mahdi

Army in Sadr City. In fact, last November he proposed that US forces completely withdraw from Baghdad and leave security in the hands of the Shiite-dominated Iraqi army and police.

Now, confronted with the Sadrist boycott and open threats from Washington that his government is on notice, Maliki has apparently agreed to US demands. Bush stated on Wednesday night that the Iraqi prime minister had pledged the US military would have “a green light” to go into any neighbourhood which was “home to those fueling the sectarian violence”.

In answer to questions from the *Washington Post* as to whether Maliki has explicitly sanctioned operations against Sadr, a senior administration official stated during a background briefing for journalists: “Without going into the details of presidential conversations, everyone understands that the Mahdi Army and Sadr have to be dealt with.” Maliki, the official stated, “has said that the commander will be free to go after those who act outside the law wherever they are in Baghdad.... That would include Sadr City”.

A crackdown on the Sadrists will inevitably be one of the bloodiest stages of the Iraq war, costing numerous American lives and causing the deaths of thousands more Iraqis. Fighting the Mahdi Army, the *Washington Post* noted yesterday, could lead to “months of fighting in the streets”. Fearing Shiite army units would refuse to attack Sadr City or even turn their guns on American forces, the US has insisted that two Iraqi army brigades made up of Kurdish militiamen deploy to the capital to take part in operations in Shiite areas. This raises the prospect of a Kurdish-Shiite conflict in addition to the Sunni-Shiite sectarian violence that is already claiming thousands of Iraqi lives each month.

Moreover, there is little indication that the Bush administration has given serious thought to the possibility that an attack on Moqtada al-Sadr could trigger an anti-US insurrection across southern Iraq. The build-up toward confrontation continues however. US troops raided a home in Sadr City overnight and reportedly begun erecting roadblocks and checkpoints at key entry points into the suburb earlier this week. This week’s bloody scenes in Haifa Street and the aerial bombardment of densely populated urban areas are now to be replicated throughout the capital.



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