

The implications in Iraq of Bush's military "surge"

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The following is a report delivered by James Cogan to a membership meeting of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) from January 25 to January 27, 2007. Cogan is a member of the SEP central committee and a regular WSWS correspondent on Iraq. SEP national secretary Nick Beams's report was posted in three parts. Part one on February 12, Part two on February 13 and Part three on February 14.

Arguably one of the most sobering developments during 2006 was the publication on October 11 of a detailed survey into the number of deaths caused by the Iraq war. The study was conducted by Johns Hopkins University and vetted and published by the *Lancet* medical journal.

Amid conscious efforts by the establishment media to obscure what is taking place in Iraq, and the incessant propaganda of the Bush administration and its international collaborators that the war is bringing "freedom" and "democracy," the figure arrived at by the study provided the grim reality: some 655,000 Iraqis lives had been lost between March 2003 and June 2006.

The *Lancet* study was dismissed by US President George Bush as "not credible". The survey conducted in Iraq, however, used exactly the same methodology as the surveys used to arrive at the estimate that 400,000 people have died as a result of the civil war in the Darfur region of Sudan—a figure that, unlike the Iraq statistic, is presented as unquestioned fact.

The Darfur death toll is derived from a survey of 1,136 refugees in late 2004 as to the number of deaths in their family. The death rate has been extended into the future to reach the widely used number of 400,000 nationwide. In Iraq, close to 2,000 families were interviewed in the first half of 2006 to reach the estimate of 655,000 deaths. It remains the most accurate estimate of the impact of the US invasion.

At least 186,000 of the deaths in Iraq were directly attributable to the bombs and bullets of the US occupation forces. Thousands died in the "shock-and-awe" invasion itself—over 2,000 were killed on April 5, 2003 alone, during a tank rampage through Baghdad. Thousands more died in the indiscriminate bombings of the people of Fallujah, Karbala and Najaf during 2004; and continue to die in the air strikes and raids that are carried out virtually every day against alleged insurgent hideouts.

The economic ruination of the country, the collapse of any semblance of governance and civil society, and the murderous sectarian conflict triggered by the US occupation, are responsible for the remaining 470,000 deaths.

In the report, "The consequences of the US-led war against Iraq," delivered in January 2006 to a meeting of the WSWS International Editorial Board, we sought to review how the policies pursued by the invading US forces were centrally responsible for the civil war raging inside Iraq.

We do not politically absolve the various bourgeois nationalist and Stalinist parties for their role in breaking up the powerful socialist currents that existed within the working class and oppressed of the Middle East, or for attributing revolutionary potential to reactionary Islamist forces, or for

promoting communal and ethnic identity over class. But it is US imperialism that is attempting to re-impose colonial rule over the region and it has sought to do so by the criminal method of divide-and-rule.

US policies since March 2003 have consciously fomented divisions between the country's ethnic and religious communities. The sectarian lynching of Saddam Hussein by representatives of pro-occupation Shiite fundamentalist parties was only the most recent provocation.

The US has not created democracy in Iraq, but torn the country apart. In Baghdad and the oil-rich south, the US occupation encouraged the Shiite clergy and fundamentalist movements to supplant the predominantly Sunni ruling elite that held sway under Hussein's Baathist regime. In the north, Kurdish nationalists have consolidated a de-facto separate state, complete with its own government and military forces.

The constitution imposed on Iraq by the Bush administration has deliberately encouraged these Shiite and Kurdish communalist forces to believe they can establish themselves as the middlemen for US corporations to exploit the country's oil. In predominantly Sunni Arab areas, the population has been brutally repressed, economically ruined and politically alienated.

Sectarian killings and ethnic cleansing have ensued as the rival factions of the elite—all of which are as reactionary and anti-working class as the other—fight one another for control of territory and power. Since the destruction of a major Shiite mosque in Samarra on February 22 last year by alleged Sunni extremists, the scale of the killing has soared exponentially.

In Baghdad, Shiite government death squads and militia face off against Sunni militias. Iraq's capital is the scene of vicious reprisals and counter-reprisals. The monthly death toll in Baghdad is now over 6,000.

The violence is depopulating Iraq. An estimated 500,000 Iraqis have been forced from their homes since the bombing of the Golden Dome mosque in Samarra. There are now about two million Iraqis living outside the country and another 1.7 million have been internally displaced—more than 12 percent of the population turned into refugees.

As we meet today, however, we must recognise that we are living through only the early stages of the criminality, horror and loss of life in the Middle East.

On January 10, George Bush announced a major escalation of US military operations in Iraq. A build-up of US and Iraqi government forces is taking place in Baghdad. By the end of May, the new American commander General David Petraeus claims he will have 85,000 troops at his disposal, plus Iraqi police units.

In press comments on January 24, Petraeus made clear the US military does not intend to wait until then to begin implementing the "Baghdad plan" that he has been centrally involved in drawing up.

The plan consists of creating what have been christened as "gated communities"—that is, American and Iraqi troops intend to move into resistance strongholds throughout the city, slaughter any opposition using overwhelming force and then occupy the district. The plan is predicated

on the assumption there will be a sharp increase in casualties, as it places the occupation troops in the immediate vicinity of the support base of the insurgency, rather than having them withdraw to secure compounds.

Already, areas where Sunni Arab-based guerilla groups are strong such as Haifa Street are being attacked. Petraeus has a far broader perspective, however. For the first time, the US intends to move into Sadr City, the densely-populated Shiite working class district of eastern Baghdad, and seek to destroy the Mahdi Army militia that follows cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The prospect looms of protracted urban warfare between the occupation forces and the militia, which numbers in the tens of thousands. Civilian casualties from such an operation will be considerable.

The initial stage of an attack on the Sadrist movement is underway. The US military announced on January 17 that raids over the previous 45 days had led to the arrest of 600 Mahdi Army fighters and 16 key militia leaders. A similar period of provocation preceded the eruption of an uprising in April 2004 and the subsequent slaughter of Shiite rebels in Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf.

Mid-February is looming as the possible date for a major offensive. Iraqi government units made up of ethnic Kurds from northern Iraq are en route to participate in an attack on Sadr City. The US military considers the Shiite-dominated units as unreliable.

The use of Kurdish forces against Shiite militiamen will have considerable implications, especially in the volatile northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Kirkuk is claimed by the Kurdish nationalist parties as an integral part of Iraqi Kurdistan. But hundreds of thousands of Shiite Arabs and ethnic Turkomen living in the city bitterly oppose coming under Kurdish rule.

The Mahdi Army is present in Kirkuk and has already fought battles with Kurdish militias, which are accused of carrying out ethnic cleansing. If Kurdish troops attack its Baghdad stronghold, the level of communal violence in the north will escalate dramatically. It cannot be ruled out that Turkey, which is opposed to the existence of a de-facto Kurdish state on its border, could seek to exploit the situation to justify military intervention.

Obvious questions arise concerning the US military's Baghdad plan. It is close to 18 months since Moqtada al-Sadr called off the Shiite uprising in exchange for a political role for himself and the faction of the Shiite establishment that he represents. Since then, the Sadrist movement has emerged as the largest faction in the Shiite coalition that dominates the pro-occupation government. While it engages in populist rhetoric against the presence of foreign troops, the Mahdi Army does not attack US forces.

Indeed, such has been the willingness of Sadr and the Shiite elite to collaborate with the occupation—despite the opposition of the Shiite masses—that a faction of the American military establishment has advocated what they call the 80-20 option. Given that Shiites and Kurds make up 80 percent of the population and Sunnis make up most of the insurgency, the argument goes, the best course for the US would be to assist the Shiite-dominated government—including the Sadrists—to carry out a sectarian bloodbath against the Sunni Arab population and crush resistance.

Why, then, is the Bush administration doing the exact opposite and labeling the Shiite Mahdi Army as the greatest threat facing the US project in Iraq?

The essential issues in assessing US policy in Iraq and the broader Middle East are the motives for the war in the first place.

Confronted with economic decline and rising social tensions domestically, and mounting challenges from an array of rivals large and small, US imperialism has embarked on the course of using its military might to control the exploitation and distribution of the key resources of the modern economy—oil and gas. The American ruling elite believes that the domination of world energy supplies will enable it to both retain its waning economic and political hegemony and suppress class antagonisms

at home.

The US plan for Iraq is not a democracy in which the masses determine the country's future or how its oil wealth is distributed, but an American client state that delivers lucrative profits to US energy corporations and provides a base for further aggression in the region.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are not the end of US militarism, but only its initial stage. The surge of US troops into Baghdad cannot be assessed apart from Washington's broader plans to initiate a war against Iran and establish a stranglehold over the entire Persian Gulf.

The Mahdi Army is viewed as an obstacle to US plans. It recruits among the urban working class and poor, who are hostile to the presence of American troops and the corporate plunder of Iraq's resources. They are equally hostile to any further US aggression in the Middle East.

The surge of troops is aimed at provoking a confrontation and conducting a pre-emptive strike against Shiite militias that could rise up again against US forces. While the Sadrist leadership is desperately seeking to keep their supporters in check, they are discrediting themselves in the process and will not be able to restrain an explosive anti-imperialist response indefinitely, especially in the event of a war with Iran.

An interesting article in the *New York Times* on January 18 cited a Sadr City shopkeeper, who observed with contempt that the Sadrist leaders were not resisting the US incursions into the area because they were worried about their "Italian shoes". That is, ordinary Shiites already believe the Sadrists are more concerned with holding on to the privileges they have gained from the occupation than with honouring their populist pledges to prevent Iraq being turned into an American colony.

Bush's State of the Union on January 24 reasserted his administration's intention to carry out a bloodbath against the Mahdi Army. Bush pointedly added "Shiite extremists supported by Iran" to the administration's crude allegations that civilisation itself was being threatened by Sunni-based extremists such as Al Qaeda.

Bush again warned the Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to live up to its reluctant promises to support a crackdown on Shiite militias. The White House is also demanding that the Shiite parties establish a so-called national unity government and share power with representatives of the Sunni ruling elite that held sway under Saddam Hussein. If they do not, there have been ample indications that Washington will sponsor some form of military coup against Maliki.

The Bush administration's decision to escalate the Iraq war can only have the most profound and, in many respects, unpredictable consequences. A review of the US strategy in Baghdad is by no means intended to suggest that it will be successful. The conception in American ruling circles that the opposition of the Iraqi masses can be simply bombed away has been repeatedly disproved over the past five years. From one end of the globe to the other, anti-imperialist sentiment has burgeoned.

Moreover, it is highly significant that the Iraq surge has been made in complete defiance of the will of the American people and under conditions of bitter divisions in American ruling circles over the threat to domestic stability posed by continuing an unpopular war.

The Iraq Study Group, which issued its report last December, labelled the war a failure and advocated a "change of course", embodied these divisions.

A confidante of Republican powerbroker James Baker made the following comment to the *Washington Monthly* on the considerations that had led Baker to agree to head the ISG: "Baker is primarily motivated by his desire to avoid a war at home—that things will fall apart not on the battlefield but at home. So he wants a ceasefire in American politics".

Democrat co-chair Lee Hamilton echoed this, outlining both his party's and Baker's concern that the US could become "ungovernable" due to opposition and conflicts over the Iraq war. Neither Hamilton nor Baker could see any alternative to US imperialism stepping back—temporarily at

least—from the Bush administration’s unilateral militarism.

While making clear US forces should remain in Iraq indefinitely, the ISG report called for the pulling of US troops away from the worst fighting, concessions to the anti-occupation insurgency to lessen its intensity and an international conference that would secure aid for the pro-US Iraqi government from the UN, the European Union and regional states. Stabilising Iraq, the ISG insisted, required a retreat from the Bush administration’s aggressive policy toward Iran and Syria.

The Bush administration’s response has been to insist that no stepping back from American imperial designs over the Middle East is possible. Any retreat, however temporary, would be exploited by US rivals everywhere to weaken American interests. The subjugation of Iraq must be completed, confrontation with Iran must be pursued and further wars must be prepared. The economic interests of a small capitalist oligarchy demand it. The domestic implications have once again been spelt out by Vice President Dick Cheney, who implicitly denounced any political opposition as treacherous in his press interviews following Bush’s surge speech.

In conclusion, our work over the coming year will take place within the context of an escalating carnage in Iraq, US aggression against other states, and rising class conflict within the US and internationally. The decay of capitalist society is objectively posing the necessity for social revolution. It is our responsibility to bring that perspective into the international working class. As Nick Beams explained in his opening report, we must transform an unconscious historical process into a conscious political movement.

In the advanced centres, the old labour organisations are discredited and advocate militarism and the free market. The Pabloite tendencies are prostrate before them, supporting neo-colonialism or insisting that the masses must confine any opposition to impotent protests to the official establishment.

In the oppressed countries, the bourgeois nationalists can offer only increasingly threadbare demagogy as they bow down to the dictates of globalised capital. In the Middle East, for example, the Islamic fundamentalist tendencies are incapable of opposing imperialist aggression and are seeking to keep their grip over the masses with communalism and sectarianism.

In our statement of January 22, 2007, we defined our task as the struggle to unite the working class internationally in the fight for a socialist future. That perspective will be taken forward by the work we have outlined for the WSWs and the SEP over the coming year.



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