

Iraq: Nine US troops dead, 20 wounded in Baqubah

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25 April 2007

The occupation forces in Iraq suffered one of their largest casualties in a single attack on Monday when suicide bombers penetrated the defences of a recently established US patrol base on the outskirts of Baqubah. The city, to the east of Baghdad, has been the scene of increasing fighting between Sunni-based guerrillas and the US military over the past several months.

Nine paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division were killed and five seriously wounded by two massive bomb blasts. Fifteen other soldiers suffered minor wounds. According to a US military spokesman, one of the bombers rammed a vehicle into the base's gate. In the ensuing chaos, a second bomber drove a dump truck filled with explosives into the compound and detonated it. Much of the patrol base was reduced to rubble.

For the unit involved, the 5th Squadron, 73rd Cavalry, the bombing is a serious blow. The McClatchy newservice reported that out of its 330 troops, 18 have been killed in the past five weeks. Dozens of others have been injured. For the 82nd Airborne Division, Monday's casualties represent its largest daily loss of life since a major ambush in Vietnam in 1969.

While Baghdad is the focus of the Bush administration's Iraq "surge," additional US troops have been deployed to Baqubah due to the intensity of the insurgency in the surrounding Diyala province. A 700-strong battalion of Stryker armoured vehicles were rushed there from further north in March, to reinforce the units that have been ordered to pacify the city.

In response, a coalition of Sunni extremist organisations announced earlier this month that they had formed "The Islamic State in Iraq" in Diyala and released the names of its "ministers". US intelligence officials believe that fighters from Baghdad moved to the area to avoid the US operations in the capital. Among them are men who are thought to be adherents

of Al Qaeda, which has developed a following in Iraq since the US invasion. US casualties in Diyala are now only exceeded by deaths and injuries in Baghdad and the western province of Anbar. Yesterday, the "Islamic State" claimed responsibility for Monday's bomb blast at the Baqubah patrol base.

The attack highlights how the tactics being employed as part of the Bush administration's escalation in Iraq are placing American troops at far greater risk. The plan formulated by the new US commander, General David Petraeus, calls for US forces to move into insurgent strongholds and establish forward patrol bases, such as the one attacked in Baqubah. Petraeus has also advocated the complete encirclement of targeted areas with walls and other barriers, to effectively imprison the population inside ghettos, or what US officers have called "gated communities". The troops inserted into the forward bases are expected to conduct aggressive patrols into the sealed-off area, flushing out and killing or capturing any anti-occupation fighters.

The reality is far different from the theory. Like similar schemas tried in Algeria and Vietnam, Petraeus's tactics ignore the overwhelming opposition of the Iraqi people to the US occupation and the widespread popular support for the insurgency. The "surge" simply means that US forces are far more exposed.

On April 11, Robert Fisk of the *Independent* reported the prediction of a former US officer that the security plan would enable guerrillas to dramatically step up their attacks on the occupation forces. Once US troops had moved into insurgent strongholds, they would be forced to rely heavily on helicopters for supply. "The helicopters will be vulnerable coming into the patrol bases," the ex-officer noted, "and the enemy will

destroy as many of them as they can”.

Since the surge began, nine US and British helicopters have either been shot down or crashed. In January, 12 US soldiers died near Baqubah when a Black Hawk went down. Locals claim insurgents destroyed it. Three choppers have also come down near the Taji airbase, 27 kilometres north of Baghdad.

The ex-officer warned that the “second part” of the insurgents’ plan “will be to attempt to destroy one of the patrol bases”. He told Fisk: “They will begin that process by utilising their people inside the ‘gated communities’ to help them enter. They will choose bases where the Iraqi troops either will not fight or will actually support them. The American reaction will be to use massive firepower, which will destroy the neighbourhood which is being ‘protected.’”

The Baqubah bombing is the most serious attack thus far on one of the exposed outposts, but there is no reason to believe it will be the last. Thousands of American troops are now being put in similar positions across Baghdad. Far from being welcomed by the Iraqi people, their tactics are inflaming popular hostility. Residents confront curfews, the erection of walls and barbed wire obstacles that severely restrict their movement and constant house searches and street interrogations.

The US entry into Shiite areas has had particularly deadly ramifications. The militias that previously provided a local network of security and intelligence against sectarian attacks have been ordered to go to ground by their leadership, to avoid clashes with American troops. Sunni extremists have been able exploit the situation to carry out bombings against Shiite civilians, provoking massive resentment toward the occupation forces.

The proximity of the US bases to residential areas also makes inevitable greater casualties among Iraqi civilians. These are dismissed by the US military as “collateral damage”. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on April 24 on one case in which locals in a southern Baghdad suburb allege American helicopters killed a mother, one of her sons and a family friend after mistaking them for insurgents. An air strike in the Shiite district of Sadr City in late March, ordered as part of the establishment of an American forward base in that neighbourhood, left as many as 16 people dead.

The Bush administration has repeatedly attempted to

justify its escalation with claims it would bring “stability” to Iraq. Every statistic testifies to the contrary.

Iraqi civilians are being killed at a higher rate since the security plan began than before. At least 700 were killed last week alone, including more than 200 in the bombing of the Sadriya market in Baghdad.

Attacks on occupation troops in the relatively stable, predominantly Shiite southern provinces are once again increasing as Shiite anger grows. Eleven British troops have been killed this month—the highest monthly toll in four years. Australian troops, who have suffered only a handful of casualties while operating in the south, were attacked multiple times on Monday. Three were wounded when a roadside bomb crippled their armoured vehicle.

The Baqubah bombing drove the number of US military deaths in April to 85, the highest monthly figures so far in 2007. Total American deaths now stand at 3,333, with another 24,314 wounded.

As the Bush administration’s “surge” continues, the terrible toll of US and Iraqi deaths will only accelerate.



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