

US soldiers captured as “surge” provokes greater Iraqi resistance

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The deployment of more than 4,000 American and Iraqi government troops to hunt for three soldiers captured by Iraqi insurgents on Saturday is a sign of desperation on the part of the US military. The last of the additional US troops ordered to Iraq as part of the Bush administration’s “surge” have yet to arrive. But it is already apparent that the tactics of General David Petraeus—the top US commander in Iraq—have only deepened the hostility of the Iraqi people toward the US occupation, and exposed over-stretched American forces to greater attacks and casualties.

The captured soldiers were part of a seven-man squad from the 10th Mountain Division. Along with an Iraqi translator, they were manning an observation post near a key road 20 kilometres south of Baghdad, near Mahmudiyah. As additional US forces move into the Iraqi capital, more and more supplies have to be trucked in from Kuwait. Hundreds of troops have to be deployed along the main roads just to limit the number of roadside bombs targetting US supply convoys. The rural towns and villages to the immediate south of Baghdad have been labelled the “triangle of death” due to the ferocious anti-US resistance from the predominantly Sunni Arab population.

In the early hours of the morning, the small US squad was attacked and overrun. There was apparently no backup in the vicinity. The units sent to their assistance took more than an hour to reach the scene. The bodies of four soldiers and the translator were found in their burnt-out Humvees.

Over the weekend, US troops scoured villages, farms and canals for traces of the missing three, ransacking the homes of hundreds of people in an area where hatred of the American occupation is already intense.

Mahmudiyah was the scene of one of the most publicised atrocities against Iraqi civilians carried out by US troops. In March 2006, American soldiers raped and murdered Abeer Qasim Hamza, a 14-year-old girl, as well as killing her five-year old sister and her parents. Several months later, insurgents captured two soldiers from the same US squad and killed another—most likely with the assistance of outraged Iraqi government forces. The bodies of the captured Americans were later found castrated and beheaded.

The “Islamic State in Iraq”—a Sunni fundamentalist organisation that claims to have ties with Al Qaeda—has issued

an Internet statement claiming that its forces are holding the three soldiers captured on Saturday. The statement reportedly declared: “You should remember what you have done to our sister Abeer.”

The search for the missing soldiers is continuing. Associated Press reported yesterday that leaflets were dropped from the air and “trucks with loudspeakers were roaming the area urging people to come forward with information”. The military reported that it had questioned at least 450 Iraqis and detained 11.

US commanders clearly fear that if they do not recover the three men, or if they suffer gruesome deaths, it will further undermine the morale of American troops. Morale has already been shaken by the announcement that most soldiers will have to serve a 15-month instead of a 12-month tour, and also by the practical implications of Petraeus’s “surge” plan.

Petraeus has ordered US forces to establish vulnerable field bases deep inside insurgent strongholds in Baghdad and the provinces of Anbar and Diyala, where the insurgency is particularly fierce. Dozens of such bases have been set up. American and Iraqi government troops, living rough and under constant risk of attack, are carrying out aggressive house-to-house searches and patrols. Particularly volatile areas, such as the suburb of Adhamiyah, are being sealed off with four-metre concrete walls, forcing all traffic to pass through heavily-guarded checkpoints.

Petraeus argued in a counter-insurgency paper that such tactics, combined with political overtures to the Sunni Arab elite who formed the base of support for the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, could finally bring an end to the anti-US guerilla war being fought by Sunni insurgents.

At the same time, the White House and Pentagon believed that a US crackdown on the Shiite Mahdi Army militia would weaken the movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which has mass support among the Shiite population and demands US withdrawal. The weakening of the Sadrists would enable Washington to pressure the Iraqi government to pass stalled legislation, including an oil bill to enable the exploitation of Iraqi reserves by American conglomerates. By 2008 and the US presidential election campaign, Iraq would be stabilised under US domination, and Bush and the Republicans could claim

victory.

Events on the ground, however, are not unfolding according to the “surge” script. US casualties climbed in April to 104 dead and 634 wounded. Among them were nine paratroopers who were killed when a suicide bomber drove an explosives-filled truck into one of the forward bases in Baqubah, the capital of Diyala province. The targeting of the Mahdi Army has also provoked a major escalation in anti-occupation attacks in the Shiite suburbs of Baghdad and the mainly Shiite provinces of southern Iraq. The British forces around Basra suffered their highest casualties last month since 2003—12 dead, along with dozens wounded.

A factor in the upsurge of resistance is Iraqi outrage over the mass detentions by US and Iraqi government forces in recent months. Thousands of men—both Sunni and Shiite—have been dragged off to prison camps, accused of being connected to insurgent groups or the Mahdi Army. According to figures cited by the *Washington Post*, government detention centres are now holding close to 20,000 people, while US-run prisons have 19,500 inmates—an increase of 3,000 since February.

A UN official investigating the government prisons found 827 men crammed into wards designed to accommodate 300. Detainees have reported systematic abuse, including rape, and the use of torture to extract confessions. As word has spread about the prison conditions, resistance has intensified to US military operations, both in revenge and to prevent more young men being swept up in the dragnet.

Attacks on occupation forces have escalated this month. According to unnamed soldiers cited by Associated Press, one infantry company in Diyala lost five armoured Stryker vehicles in one week to roadside bombs. Six soldiers and a Russian journalist were killed in an explosion on May 6. Some bombs are so large that even Abram battle tanks are at risk. A sergeant who was in a Stryker destroyed by a bomb told AP: “With what we got hit with the other day, it wouldn’t have mattered what we were in. We were going to take casualties regardless.”

Because of the scale of the fighting, as many as 3,000 additional troops are now being transferred from Baghdad to Diyala province. The provincial governor reported Monday that some 5,000 civilians had fled from villages targetted by US counter-insurgency operations.

In Basra, Shiite militiamen are continuing attacks on the British-led troops occupying the city. A Danish armoured vehicle was destroyed on Monday, killing one soldier and wounding five others. The same day, British and Iraqi troops carrying out a raid on alleged “high-level insurgents” were attacked with small arms and rockets. One British Warrior armoured personnel carrier was crippled.

Violence has also spread into the north of Iraq, with two car bombings this month against the political offices of the Kurdish nationalist parties that control the northern provinces and work closely with the US occupation. As many as 50 people were killed in the bombing of offices in the city of Mahkmur, near

Irbil, on Monday.

In Baghdad, the focus of Petraeus’s plan, US troops are being killed virtually every day by snipers and roadside bombs. Four soldiers were killed in separate attacks on Monday alone. Civilian employees of the US embassy, which is located inside the heavily-guarded Green Zone in the centre of the capital, told McClatchy Newspapers last week that mortar and rocket attacks had soared since the surge began. On May 3, the embassy reportedly instructed its staff to “remain within a hardened structure to the maximum extent possible and strictly avoid congregating outdoors”. People moving outdoors have been ordered to wear helmets and bulletproof vests until further notice.

One embassy employee told McClatchy: “In any other embassy we would have been evacuated. As always, the US government is reactive, not proactive. They are going to wait until 20 people die, then the people back in Washington will say we have a problem.” Yesterday, a mortar shell wounded five civilian contractors in the Green Zone. US casualties so far in May are 49 dead, pushing the total number of American and allied troops killed since March 2003 to 3,674. As many as 800 civilian contractors have lost their lives.

Efforts are being made to censor the already tightly-controlled coverage of the war. The Iraqi government introduced laws this month forbidding journalists and photographers from filming the impact of insurgent attacks, in part to keep “insurgents and militias from keeping track of their success rate”. The Pentagon has announced that all US military computers will be blocked from accessing a range of popular video and blogging sites, including YouTube and Myspace. The immediate effect will be to prevent US soldiers in Iraq from posting images or making blog entries that reveal the extent of the fighting to the broader American population.



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