

US military prepares Fallujah-style bloodbath in Iraqi city of Baqubah

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A huge US offensive codenamed “Operation Arrowhead Ripper” is underway in the Iraqi city of Baqubah, as part of extensive American operations aimed at suppressing insurgent groups in Baghdad and areas to the north and south of the capital. US troops, backed by armoured vehicles, artillery, helicopter gunships and warplanes, have sealed off the city of 300,000. The action recalls the murderous November 2004 assault on Fallujah in which much of the population fled and large sections of the town were levelled.

The number of US deaths has risen sharply as troops have been ordered into more aggressive actions throughout Iraq. A further 10 soldiers were killed on Saturday—seven in three separate roadside bombings in Baghdad and Tikrit. Another soldier was killed by small arms fire and two more died of noncombatant causes. A total of 32 have died in the past six days and 80 so far this month. Top US generals are warning of continuing high casualty rates.

No reports have been released of Iraqi civilian casualties, which are certain to be far higher. In a bid to prevent anti-occupation militia leaders fleeing Baqubah, the US military cordoned off the city, trapping the entire population. At least 8,000 American troops backed by 2,000 Iraqi soldiers and police are systematically sweeping through Baqubah, arbitrarily detaining suspects, destroying pockets of resistance and levelling any building regarded as a potential threat.

Media reports, largely from journalists embedded with US troops, have attempted to portray the operation as a humanitarian mission to liberate the population from “Al Qaeda”. While the designation of all anti-occupation fighters as Al Qaeda extremists suits the Bush administration’s propaganda purposes at home, it bears no relation to reality. Sunni extremists last year proclaimed Baqubah the capital of the “Islamic State of Iraq” but the group known as “Al Qaeda in

Mesopotamia” is just one of a number of Sunni insurgent outfits involved.

Reflecting the sentiments in the US military hierarchy, embedded reporter Michael Yon could barely contain his glee over the Baqubah operation. “People are trying to escape the fighting, but we made this mistake in places like Tal Afar and Fallujah where our people attacked and left huge escape routes. This time, the number one priority is to trap and destroy Al Qaeda,” he wrote on his blog on Friday, adding: “At the going rate, Al Qaeda in Baqubah will soon have two choices: Surrender, or die.”

US forces are turning Baqubah, the capital of Diyala province to the north-east of Baghdad, into a giant prison camp. As the operation got underway last week, leaflets were dropped on the city ordering all residents to remain inside their homes. The *New York Times* reported that the military intended to “fingerprint and take biometric data from every resident who seems to be a potential fighter”. Under conditions where survey after survey has revealed that the majority of the Iraqi population is hostile to the US occupation and supportive of armed insurgents, that means everyone is suspect.

According to *Stars and Stripes* on June 22, US troops were ordered last Tuesday to detain all Iraqi men they encountered. A US company from the First Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment detained four teenage boys, cuffing their hands with plastic flex and took them away for interrogation. The father of the two of the boys pleaded with the troops to tell him what would happen with them. He begged the soldiers not to hand his sons over to Iraqi soldiers or police, fearing that Shiite militiamen who dominate the security forces might kill them.

Embedded journalists dutifully repeated official propaganda that the operation was about winning “hearts and minds” and “bonding” the Iraqi forces with the local population. But it was difficult to disguise the widely felt

distrust, fear, resentment and hostility to Iraqi and American troops alike. The *New York Times* on Friday reported a conversation between a US captain and a resident which “soon turned into a debate on the Americans’ conduct in Iraq”. While he had no sympathy for Al Qaeda, the 50-year-old Iraqi angrily criticised US troops for gunning down a man for no reason, a claim the captain denied. He also made clear that he regarded the Iraqi forces as even worse—little more than Shiite militia in uniform.

American troops went into Baqubah in mid-March but only managed to “pacify” two eastern neighbourhoods. The latest offensive, which began last Tuesday, is focussed on west Baqubah. “In Khatoon, the southernmost section of the operations area, the US military conducted earth-shaking bombing runs and house-to-house searches for two days, punctuated by occasional gunfights,” the *Los Angeles Times* explained.

Operational commander Brigadier-General Mick Bednarek told the media on weekend: “It is house to house, block to block, street to street, sewer to sewer—and it’s also cars, vans—we’re searching every one of them.” He claimed that US forces controlled about 60 percent of the city and had killed 60 to 100 fighters. Bednarek said troops had trapped about 50 to 100 insurgents and were “closing the noose” but predicted it could be weeks before Iraqi military and police secured the area.

Colonel Steve Townsend, commander of the 3rd Stryker Brigade, identified three districts of the city as a problem and said the military proposed to erect concrete barriers and checkpoints around those areas. Speaking to Reuters, Command Sergeant Major Jeff Huggins bluntly declared: “We are enveloping the enemy in a kill sack.” As in Fallujah, the US military intends to use its vastly superior firepower to level any source of armed resistance. Early on Friday, US helicopter gunships slaughtered 17 “Al Qaeda suspects” on the outskirts of the nearby town of Khalis.

A recent report from Fallujah provided a glimpse of what a “pacified” Baqubah will be like. Much of the city remains in ruins. Little compensation or assistance has been provided to the residents, who are again under martial law, including a curfew from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. Muhammed Aydan, a 42-year-old father, told the IRIN news agency: “We are living like prisoners, lacking assistance at all levels. Aid support, which last year was always here, can’t be seen anymore. We depend solely on ourselves, drinking dirty water even though we know our children are getting sick from it. Power supply is less than

two hours a day in some areas of Fallujah and sometimes we have to go three days without a shower to save water.”

In Baqubah, residents are already complaining of receiving no water or electricity since the start of Operation Arrowhead Ripper. Insisting that Baqubah is a Sunni insurgent stronghold, the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad has provided little in the way of assistance and services to the city on the pretext that it would fall into the hands of Al Qaeda.

It is already clear that the offensive in Baqubah is not going to be the final showdown with anti-occupation insurgents that the American military had hoped it would be. Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno told the press last Friday that US intelligence estimated that 80 percent of the top Al Qaeda leaders had fled the city before fighting had even begun. Amid recriminations as to who was responsible, Odierno declared: “Frankly, I think they knew an operation was coming in Baqubah. They watched the news. They understood we had a surge. They understood Baqubah was designated as a problem area.”

Baqubah is just the most prominent of a series of targets aimed at so-called Al Qaeda strongholds that have been used as staging areas for attacks in Baghdad. In what it terms “the Battle of the Baghdad belts,” the US military is conducting operations in other areas of Diyala to the north of the capital, the Arab Jabour area in the south, various safe havens to the west and northwest and in the Baghdad districts of Adhamiya, Rashid and Mansour. Odierno claimed on Friday that the new operations had been successful in seizing more than 700 detainees, killing 160 insurgents and uncovering hundreds of weapons caches and bombs.

What Odierno is describing is not the suppression of isolated groups of insurgents, but a colonial-style war of repression against a hostile population. As they rampage through cities like Baqubah, the US troops are creating fresh reserves of hostility and opposition to the illegitimate American occupation of the country.



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