

Fighting rages across Iraq as Bush claims military “progress”

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President Bush’s attempts last Thursday to justify the open-ended US occupation of Iraq by claiming that his “surge” strategy is making progress bear no relation to reality. What is taking place is the same inconclusive war of attrition against a hostile population that the US military has been waging for four years to secure its domination over the country and its resources. More American soldiers and more aggressive operations have simply resulted in more casualties, more detentions and a deepening of the atmosphere of fear and loathing towards the US presence.

The military operations of the past week provide a glimpse into the disaster that the Bush administration has created in Iraq. Baghdad, where the bulk of the 30,000 additional US troops have been deployed, is a continuous battle zone. Every day, new reports are made of clashes in the suburbs, attacks on US positions and government facilities and US-led raids against alleged “terrorists”—the term now universally applied by the American military to any Iraqi who opposes the foreign conquest of the country.

Even as Bush told the Washington press conference that the war had to continue to defeat “the same folks... who attacked us in America on September 11”—meaning Al Qaeda-aligned Sunni extremists—the thrust of US military operations this week in the capital has been against Shiite opponents of the occupation who follow the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The Sadrists have opposed the Iraqi government and its attempts to implement the so-called US “benchmarks”. In particular, they have rejected US demands for the opening up of Iraq’s oil industry to foreign companies and are insisting on a timetable for the withdrawal of all American troops from the country. Their legislators are currently boycotting the parliament and seeking to form a political bloc against Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Sadr’s demands are backed by the majority of the Shiite population. While raids by US forces into Sadrist strongholds have captured or killed hundreds of Mahdi Army cadre this year, the militia remains in control of most of the predominantly Shiite areas of Baghdad, as well as a

number of southern Iraqi cities and towns.

The character of the fighting was graphically revealed in a US operation yesterday morning. US troops openly attacked a police station in the New Baghdad district and detained a police commander allegedly linked to the Mahdi Army. As they attempted to withdraw, they encountered heavy resistance. According to the Associated Press, Iraqi police and militiamen fired on the American raiding party “from multiple directions”. The US troops were rescued by an airstrike on the police positions. At least six police and seven Shiite fighters were reportedly killed.

On Thursday, a US raid was carried out in the Amin district of eastern Baghdad to seize two other alleged Mahdi Army leaders. The incursion reportedly involved more than 240 troops, Bradley armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships. It also came under intense fire as it attempted to withdraw. Militiamen and possibly local police engaged the American troops with small arms, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. A gunship raked the residential area with rockets and machine guns. At least eight civilians, including two Reuters journalists, two women and a child, were killed. Eleven alleged Iraqi fighters died. According to hospitals, a further 20 people were wounded. Iraqi police classified the civilian casualties as the result of “random American bombardment”.

Many of the civilian victims of Thursday’s raid were Shiites from the city of Baqubah, who had been driven from their homes by Sunni organisations that are sympathetic to Al Qaeda. A woman told the Associated Press: “We are refugees. We were displaced from our homes by militant attacks and now we have to deal with attacks from Americans. They hit our building and destroyed it completely. My mother is dead. My sister is dead. I don’t know where my father is.”

The raids follow a series of US attacks earlier in the week. On Monday, at least eight militiamen were killed by US troops in a street fight in the Shiite stronghold of Sadr City—the densely populated working class district of north-eastern Baghdad. The following day, the fortified Green

Zone headquarters of the US military and Iraqi government in the city centre was bombarded with the heaviest mortar attack since the occupation began over four years ago. More than 30 shells landed inside the zone, killing an American soldier and two civilian contractors, and wounding 18 others. Thursday's raids were followed by more mortar strikes on the Green Zone yesterday, which killed four Iraqi police.

The raids on the Sadrists in Baghdad may portend an even bloodier intervention into the main Shiite districts of the capital. On May 21, the *Washington Post* reported that if attempts to end the Sadrist recalcitrance failed through political means, then "the US military has formulated other options, including plans for a wholesale clearing operation in Sadr City". A US officer told the *Post*: "A second Fallujah plan exists, but we don't want to execute it."

Efforts to suppress the Sadrist movement are taking place elsewhere. In the city of Diwaniyah, to the south of Baghdad, the Sadrists are seeking to supplant pro-occupation Shiite parties. Seven civilians were reportedly killed on Tuesday during fighting between American and Iraqi government troops and the Mahdi Army. The US military reported that the dead were "suspected insurgents". Last Saturday, US gunships killed nine alleged Shiite militiamen near Diwaniyah who were fighting off a government hit squad sent in to kill or capture their commander.

On July 7, an estimated 1,000 British troops carried out a major assault on alleged Mahdi Army positions in the oil-rich southern city of Basra, where the Sadrists are also gaining influence over pro-occupation Iraqi parties and threatening to take over. No confirmed reports were made of civilian or militia casualties. The British lost an armoured vehicle, two soldiers dead and two wounded.

Bush's claims to be fighting "Al Qaeda" in Iraq might make more sense when applied to Sunni insurgent groups opposed to the US occupation. But all the evidence gives the lie to this as well. The largest guerilla organisations in Sunni areas oppose the sectarian ideology of Al Qaeda and have repeatedly denounced the indiscriminate suicide bombings and other attacks on Shiite civilians carried out by its adherents.

According to the *New York Times* on July 12, the Sunni extremist group known as "Al Qaeda in Iraq" is estimated by US intelligence to have as few as several thousand fighters—a small proportion of the insurgency. At the rate the US military claims to be killing and capturing alleged "terrorists", the organisation would have ceased to exist.

Over the course of the past week alone, US forces have carried out attacks on "Al Qaeda" in Sunni centres across Iraq. According to press releases, dozens of Iraqi fighters have been killed or captured in western Baghdad,

Iskandariyah, the northern city of Mosul, the western cities of Fallujah and Hit, and the north-eastern cities of Samarra and Baqubah.

The Al Qaeda-aligned groups had concentrated in the area around Baqubah, which they declared to be the capital of a so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) last year. Close to 10,000 US and Iraqi troops stormed the city in June. US commanders admitted at the time that the bulk of alleged Al Qaeda leaders had ample time to escape before the assault even began. Several hundred of its fighters were reportedly killed and several hundred more captured.

While the civilian population of Baqubah continues to endure martial law, curfews, dysfunctional services and food shortages, the fighting against what remains of the ISI has transferred to towns and villages north of the city. On Tuesday, the US military claimed to have killed 20 extremist fighters and captured another 20 in the village of Sheerwen. Overwhelming force was used. Three bridges were blown up from the air using 2,000-pound and 500-pound bombs. US claims that local people assisted their forces serve only to underscore the lack of support for Al Qaeda's perspective of replacing the US occupation with a radical Sunni state.

The reality is that the Bush administration is conducting a classic war of colonial occupation against an armed insurgency that has the sympathy and, in many cases, the active support of the Iraqi population. Any "progress" in such a war is necessarily ephemeral. As armed resistance is suppressed in one area, it erupts again elsewhere. The daily toll of death and misery, as well as the rising level of US casualties, continues unabated.



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