

US occupation fuels ethnic cleansing and mass repression in Iraq

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Several reports on conditions in Iraq released last week confirm that the US troop surge in 2007 has accelerated the division of the Iraqi population along ethno-religious lines and dramatically increased the number of Iraqis held in barbaric conditions of imprisonment.

The Iraqi Red Crescent Organization reported that the number of internally displaced Iraqis has more than doubled, from 499,000 to 1.1 million, since the latest US troop buildup began in February. According to the *New York Times*, “the scale of this migration has put so much strain on Iraqi governmental and relief offices that some provinces have refused to register any more displaced people, or will accept only those whose families are originally from the area.”

The vast majority of the displaced are Sunnis driven out of Shiite-dominated areas or Shiites driven out of Sunni-dominated areas: victims of ethnic cleansing carried out on the basis of religious sect. According to a summary of the Red Crescent data in the *Times*, “The effect of this vast migration is to drain religiously mixed areas in the center of Iraq, sending Shiite refugees toward the overwhelmingly Shiite areas to the south and Sunnis toward majority Sunni regions to the west and north.”

The International Organization for Migration, an agency of the United Nations, found that the rate of displacement from Baghdad, the main target of stepped-up US military violence, has increased by a factor of 20, a rise so staggering that it seems the outcome of a deliberate US military policy of partitioning the Iraqi capital city. While Baghdad was once believed to have been divided roughly 60-40, with Sunnis in the majority, the current sectarian breakdown could be as much as 80-20 Shiite.

Violence, overwhelmingly along sectarian lines, was the leading cause of forced migration. The UN agency reported that, among Iraqi internal migrants who responded to a survey, 63 percent said they had fled neighborhoods because of direct threats to their lives.

More than 25 percent said they had been forcibly expelled from their homes.

The third report came from the US military’s Task Force 134, which runs US detention operations in Iraq. It reported that since February the number of prisoners held by US and other foreign military forces has risen by 50 percent, from 16,000 in February to 24,500 now. Some 85 percent of those detained are Sunni Arabs, with the remainder mainly Shiites. Contrary to Bush administration propaganda, which portrays the armed resistance to US occupation as largely the work of foreign terrorists, only 280 of those detained are from outside Iraq, many of them citizens of states allied to the US, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Both the Red Crescent and the UN migration office suggested that the increased tempo of US military operations was directly correlated with the rapid growth in forced migration. According to Dr. Said Hakki, director of the Iraqi Red Crescent Organization, 100,000 people a month have been fleeing their homes since the US “surge” began.

The US troop surge, in point of fact, has generated more internal flight and population shift than the explosion of Sunni-Shiite violence after the bombing of the Shiite mosque of the golden dome in Samarra in February 2006, an event frequently (but falsely) cited by the Bush administration as the starting point of sectarian violence.

The internal population movement after the US escalation that began in February is greater than any in Iraq’s previous three decades of bloody conflict: the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Kurdish uprising of 1987-88, the first Gulf War in 1990-91, the failed Kurdish and Shiite uprisings of 1991, and the US invasion and conquest in 2003.

The *Times* noted, “The demographic shifts could favor those who would like to see Iraq partitioned into three semi-autonomous regions: a Shiite south and a Kurdish

north sandwiching a Sunni territory.” The US newspaper delicately avoided identifying those who support partition, but it includes not only Shiite and Kurdish sectarian leaders, but much of the US political and military establishment, including leading figures in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Such a policy of forced population transfer along sectarian and ethnic lines, using violence and intimidation to stampede those unwilling to move, is a war crime under the principles laid down at the Nuremberg Trials after World War II. Charges of ethnic cleansing could be brought against Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice and the rest of the leadership of the Bush administration, as well as their accomplices in Congress and the officer corps following its orders.

One leading Democrat, Senator Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has gone so far as to make the demand for partition of Iraq—i.e., advocacy of a war crime—a major element of his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The longer the US occupation continues, the bloodier the crimes will become. The intensifying crisis of the stooge government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has recently led a number of US officials, military and civilian, to call on the Bush administration to drop its pretense of establishing “democracy” in Iraq and establish an open military dictatorship that will take even more brutal measures against the Iraqi population.

Brig. Gen. John Bednarek, one of the commanders of the Task Force Lightning offensive in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad, told CNN Wednesday, “Democratic institutions are not necessarily the way ahead in the long-term future” of Iraq. The network cited this comment on its website, saying that “exasperated front-line U.S. generals talk openly of non-democratic governmental alternatives ...”

Maj. Gen. Benjamin Mixon, commander of Task Force Lightning, said his goal was “an effective and functioning government that is really a partner with the United States and the rest of the world in this fight against the terrorists.” His soldiers were fighting for security, not democracy, he told CNN, “stating that democracy is merely an option that Iraqis are free to choose or reject.”

A leading House Republican, Congressman Peter Hoekstra of Michigan, echoed this sentiment Friday. In an appearance on local public television in Lansing, Hoekstra, the ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, declared, “The president has to be willing to say, ‘I’m going to take democracy off the

table. We’re going to aim for safety and stability.’” Another Michigan Republican congressman, Mike Rogers, seconded Hoekstra’s sentiments, saying the US goal in Iraq should be “strategic victory” rather than democracy.

These developments underscore the falsity of the pro-war argument that is being increasingly raised by both the Bush administration and liberal apologists for the war—the claim that the United States must keep forces in Iraq, more or less indefinitely, to prevent a bloodbath among the civilian population.

Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, for instance, who has postured as a born-again opponent of the war he voted to authorize in 2002, declared that “the US must retain sufficient forces in the region to prevent a genocide.” Similar arguments have been made across the spectrum of the corporate-controlled media, from the *New York Times* to the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as by the Bush White House.

The truth is that the bloodbath of civilians is taking place in Iraq right now, under the auspices of the US occupation. The longer the occupation continues, the greater the destruction of Iraqi society, and the greater the danger that the war will spread beyond the borders of Iraq to become a more general military conflagration.

The US invasion and conquest of Iraq is directly responsible for a death toll that will, long before Bush leaves office, exceed 1 million people. This war is one of the greatest crimes in history, and all those responsible for it must be held legally and criminally responsible.



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