

Baghdad residents protest US-erected dividing wall

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Hundreds of Shiite and Sunni residents staged a protest on September 12 against a wall being constructed by US troops between their adjoining neighborhoods in northwest Baghdad. Construction on the two-kilometer long wall, part of a deliberate US effort to divide Iraq's population along religious lines, began last week without the consultation of local residents and continues despite their opposition.

The protestors demanded the Maliki government put a halt to the wall's construction and remove the completed sections dividing the Shiite neighborhood of al-Shuala and the Sunni-majority al-Ghazaliyah. The demonstrators, including clerics, tribal leaders, and workers, marched from one neighborhood to the other carrying signs declaring, "The wall is US terrorism" and "No to the dividing wall."

The military insists segregating the neighborhoods is necessary to prevent sectarian violence and reprisal killings, a claim rejected by ordinary Iraqis. In a written statement to the government, residents said that the wall was "in accordance with Al-Qaeda's plans," and that it served to "separate family from family." A recent public opinion survey commissioned by CNN Arabic found that 76 percent of Iraqis disagreed with the statement that establishing isolation walls is a solution to sectarian violence.

The US military began erecting walls along sectarian lines in the city earlier this year, as part of the crackdown on Baghdad that also included the addition of tens of thousands of US and Iraqi forces and the creation of some 70 smaller joint security bases outside the Green Zone.

The first wall, built in April around a western Baghdad Sunni neighborhood, despite widespread opposition and an order from the government to halt, was described by the US military as "one of the

centerpieces of a new strategy by coalition and Iraqi forces to break the cycle of sectarian violence." Built at night by US forces, the first wall consisted of 12-foot high, 14,000-pound concrete slabs stretching for three miles and completely walling off the neighborhood of Adamiya. Iraqi soldiers were placed at the gated entry points to screen traffic.

Some 2,000 residents marched against the Adamiya wall, saying their district was being transformed into "a big prison." In response, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki issued a call to stop the construction, to which the US military bluntly declared, "construction of security barriers across Baghdad will continue without exception".

Barriers are common in the city, particularly around the Green Zone and in marketplace areas, and the military had already blocked off roads and created some "gated communities" within Baghdad before the troop build-up. In late 2006, US forces closed off nearly all roads leading to two Sunni neighborhoods in western Baghdad. Residents there said that violence decreased initially after the roadblocks were erected, but by the spring it had increased again.

Politicians and clerics, including Shiite leader Moqtada al-Sadr, have sought to capitalize on the popular opposition to what is described as the city's "Balkanization." However, their response has by and large been limited to half-hearted complaints to US commanders.

Underscoring its resignation to the abuses of the occupation, the Baghdad council has commissioned muralists to decorate the walls with "calming" pastoral scenes. Al-Sadr issued a call to instead paint them with "magnificent tableaux that depict the ugliness and terrorist nature of the occupier, and the sedition, car bombings, blood and the like he has brought upon

Iraqis.”

US leaders cite a drop in the frequency of car bombings and gunfire in the city over the last year as evidence additional troops and barriers in Baghdad are successful means of curbing violence. However, as noted by Kim Sengupta, writing for the *Independent*, “for many Iraqis, the Americans have turned their land into a prison. The barriers, which have turned Baghdad into a series of ghettos, are meant to keep the bombers out, but they also keep residents penned in.”

The city is paralyzed by roadblocks, checkpoints and armed groups that charge tolls and extort money from residents. These bands were initially welcomed by the US military as “guardians” in the city, and continue to operate with near impunity from security forces. Even within the walled neighborhoods, armed groups collect money through intimidation and force at checkpoints.

On September 9, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki told a regional conference hosted in Baghdad that his government had made progress “in all directions.” Outside the conference area, the *Independent* reported, “intense security... created a gridlock in Baghdad with people striving to do their daily shopping before the evening curfew.”

One resident bitterly commented, “Nothing has been achieved. Why are they having foreign leaders here in their big cars when they could be doing something for the people of this country? They say things are getting safer, but I do not think so. You have a few days of little happening and then a big bomb.” She added, “There are other problems, schools are shut, we cannot get to the hospitals. I have to go home now. I do not have the time to do all I need to do. We are always being delayed by the walls.”

For the working class neighborhoods in Baghdad, the most basic infrastructure is denied. Residents are allowed only one to two hours of electricity use a day. Clean water is in short supply, and most residents lack sufficient fuel for cooking or driving. Jobs are exceedingly scarce; unemployment rates in most areas of Baghdad—as in Iraq at large—are upwards of 60 to 70 percent.

Car bombings have dropped from last year, but still strike on average three a day. Few Baghdad residents travel outside of their own neighborhoods for food, and all but one of the large markets citywide have closed because of bombings. Both US and Iraqi officials insist

there has been a substantial drop in killings, yet the city has seen an average 690 sectarian killings a month since the beginning of the surge.

An unidentified official speaking to NPR’s Tom Bullock September 10 said that the vast majority of bodies in the Baghdad morgue bore signs of torture, but that the Iraqi government no longer released statistics on such killings. “It would create a panic,” one official is quoted as saying of the death rate.

Nationwide, the death rate is appalling. A new survey from British polling agency ORB suggests that 1.2 million Iraqis have been killed since the US invasion. In Baghdad, the survey found nearly one in two households had lost at least one family member to war-related violence.

Confronted with escalating repression and dire living conditions, thousands of Iraqis are fleeing the country each day. The United Nations estimates that 60,000 Iraqis are displaced each month. In addition to the more than two million people displaced within Iraq, 1.4 million Iraqis have crossed into Syria, and as many as 750,000 are living as refugees in Jordan.

On September 10, aid agency Oxfam stated that eight million Iraqis were in urgent need of emergency aid and that “many more are living in poverty, without basic services, and increasingly threatened by disease and malnutrition. If people’s basic needs are left unattended, this will only serve to further destabilise the country,” the report said.



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