

As congressional debate opens, US escalates military operations in northern Iraq

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7 September 2007

The real intentions of the American ruling elite in relation to Iraq are being displayed, not in the phony debate that is beginning in Congress, but in the military operations conducted on a daily basis in that tortured country.

While House and Senate Democrats proclaim their desire (in words only) to bring the war to an end, the Bush administration is expanding the scope of military action, with a new offensive launched in the region north of Baghdad.

Some 12,000 US soldiers and 14,000 Iraqi security forces began Operation Lightning Hammer II on the evening of September 5, attacking targets across four provinces, including Salaheddin, Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala. This area encompasses virtually all the Arab-populated regions of northern Iraq, between the capital city and the autonomous Kurdish region.

The new military sweep began only four days after the conclusion of Lightning Hammer I, which focused on the Diyala River valley northeast of Baquba, capital of Diyala province. The latest operation is the third in a sequence that began in June and July, with Operation Arrowhead Ripper, all aimed at suppressing resistance to the US occupation in an area which has the most diverse population demographic in Iraq—a mixture of Sunni, Shia and Kurdish populations, as well as Christian and other religious minorities.

Also on Wednesday, a bloody clash took place in the Washash neighborhood of western Baghdad, a Shiite-populated enclave in the largely Sunni district of Mansour. US military spokesmen claimed that a joint Iraqi-US Special Forces team entered the district in a nighttime raid and came under fire from a dozen snipers. The troops called in air strikes by helicopter gunships that destroyed or damaged four buildings and killed and wounded dozens of people. Local police said

that 14 civilians had been killed and 10 injured in the US helicopter assault.

Residents of the neighborhood who spoke to Western news services said there was no gunfire between the raiding force and local militants, and characterized the air strikes as sudden and unprovoked. One resident, Abu Ali Saad, told the French news agency AFP, “We are a peaceful neighborhood. There are no militia here. The tanks started firing, then the helicopters came. Missiles were fired from the air. Houses were destroyed. A family of five were killed in this house,” he said, pointing to the rubble.

Another local resident, Ammar Assem, quoted by the British Broadcasting Corporation, said that US forces had prevented him from taking the wounded to the hospital. “They fired on my car when I tried to leave the area,” he said. “I had to go back.”

An Associated Press reporter interviewed a resident, who said, “US helicopters bombed our homes while we were sleeping. My son and my husband were killed and our house was destroyed.”

Another woman denounced the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, screaming, “Damned be the government, curse be on Maliki.”

Meanwhile, the bodies of another 18 victims of sectarian death squads were found Thursday morning in and around Baghdad.

The US military also revealed that eight American soldiers were killed in the past three days, six in Baghdad and two in Salaheddin province, which includes the city of Tikrit, the home town of Saddam Hussein. Five of the six US soldiers who died in Baghdad were killed in eastern Baghdad, which is dominated by the Shiite militia headed by Moqtada al-Sadr. Improvised explosive devices accounted for most of the deaths.

Both the renewed US offensive north of Baghdad and the firefight in western Baghdad suggest the increasingly precarious state of the US military occupation. While the Bush administration has hailed the decline in insurgent attacks in Anbar province, in western Iraq, as a great success, this is more the result of insurgents transferring their field of operations to provinces which were relatively quiet than of any change in US military and political tactics.

US military and political pressure in Anbar displaced some insurgent activity to Diyala province (Anbar remains the third most violent area, after Baghdad and Diyala). The repeated sweeps in Diyala have now begun to displace resistance to the three neighboring provinces.

The 26,000 troops deployed in the latest offensive, however, are far too few to carry out systematic counterinsurgency warfare over the vast territory involved, even if the Iraqi troops were capable of head-to-head combat with guerrilla fighters drawn from the local Sunni population.

Similarly, the outbreak of fighting in a western Baghdad neighborhood with militants allegedly linked to the Mahdi army suggests that the Shiite militia is actually extending its influence from its base in eastern Baghdad.

Placing additional strain on the US military is the withdrawal of British forces from the city of Basra, the largest in southern Iraq. There are press reports that the Pentagon is making plans to dispatch thousands of US troops to Basra.

Lt.-Gen. Raymond Odierno, deputy commander of the US forces in Iraq, told the *Times of London* that the US military has drawn up contingency plans for such an intervention in the event of a full-scale British withdrawal involving all 5,000 British troops in the south.

A top US military official said Thursday that the number of US troops in Iraq has reached a record high of 168,000, and will top 172,000 sometime this month, as more troops rotate in. This level of troop presence could be maintained until December, according to Maj. Gen. Richard Sherlock, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The schedule of rotations will result in a tapering off of the US total force to 162,000 by the spring, he said.

Both Bush administration officials and congressional

Republicans have made clear that the military violence will continue and escalate, regardless of the sentiments of the vast majority of either the American people or the Iraqis themselves. At the same time, congressional Democrats have repeatedly declared that they will take no action to cut off funding for the war, rendering the whole debate over Iraq policy an exercise in deceiving the public.

Two leading congressional Republicans expressed the bloodlust gripping the American ruling elite. House Republican Leader John Boehner declared that any proposal to withdraw US troops from Iraq “should be off the table” in Congress. Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina declared that the war, now four-and-a-half years old, was “finally paying dividends.” After completing a month-long stint in the US Air Force reserves in Iraq—he is a military judge advocate general—Graham hailed the US escalation. “We’re at a crossroads,” he said. “Pour it on. Seize the moment.”



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