

18 US troops killed in Iraq in first week of September

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On Thursday, four US Marines were killed in fighting in Iraq's al-Anbar province. Separately, three soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in the northern province of Nineveh. The latest casualties bring US military fatalities to 18 in the first week of September, and to at least 3,760 since the 2003 invasion.

Although the military has not released casualty details, the deaths in Nineveh province are a consequence of heightened military activity there. The three soldiers killed Thursday were members of the Army's Task Force Lightning, a large unit responsible for controlling northern Iraq.

The deaths occurred in an area where Operation Lightning Hammer II, a counterinsurgency operation involving 12,000 US soldiers and 14,000 Iraqi security forces, began September 5. Bloody US military strikes against civilian areas throughout northern Iraq have killed dozens and leveled homes in the past week.

The four Marines killed Thursday in al-Anbar were part of the Multi-National Force-West force charged with suppressing the predominantly Sunni resistance west of Baghdad. Since the invasion, 1,266 US troops have been killed in this province, more than any other region of Iraq.

Since the beginning of the year, 151 US soldiers have been killed in al-Anbar, overwhelmingly from hostile fire. Perversely, this relatively lower figure has been touted by military and political officials as one sign of success of the troop build-up which began in February and is expected to peak at 172,000 this month. Currently, there are 168,000 US troops stationed in Iraq.

The latest casualties in al-Anbar came two days after Bush made a "surprise" six-hour visit to the province, only his third such trip since 2003. In comments made to the press, Bush characterized the province as "one of the safest places in Iraq." Administration officials see a decrease in violent attacks as key evidence supporting the claim that the surge is a strategic success.

However, war-related Iraqi civilian deaths rose in August, according to national police reports compiled by the Associated Press. Certainly an immense understatement of the actual death toll, the AP estimated that at least 1,809 civilians were killed last month. In July, the figure stood at 1,760.

In general, the number of civilian deaths has been creeping upward since the spring. The increase in civilian deaths indicates that the troop surge has acted as an aggravating rather than stabilizing factor—a conclusion disputed within top US military and government circles.

A September 4 Government Accountability Office report presented the results of the surge with uncertainty: "It is unclear whether sectarian violence in Iraq has decreased—a key security benchmark—since it is difficult to measure perpetrators' intents, and various other measures of population security from different sources show differing trends." The report notes, revealingly, that "average daily attacks against civilians have remained unchanged from February to July 2007."

In contrast, Army General David Petraeus, the top US commander over Iraq operations, told the Australian press last week that ethnic and religious killings had dropped by 75 percent since last year. This fabrication was both immediately contested by independent groups and unquestioningly parroted by the major US media outlets that had received the statistic in a White House fact sheet.

Petraeus qualified his claim in the *Australian* newspaper, saying, "It's a bit macabre but some areas were literally on fire with hundreds of bodies every week and a total of 2,100 in the month of December '06, Iraq-wide. It is still much too high but we think in August in Baghdad it will be as little as one quarter of what it was."

Iraq Body Count, which compiles civilian death numbers based on media accounts, noted that any modest decline in violent incidents must be placed in context. "Levels of violence reached an all-time high in the last six

months of 2006. Only in comparison to that could the first half of 2007 be regarded as an improvement. Despite any efforts put into the surge, the first six months of 2007 were still the most deadly first six months for civilians of any year since the invasion.”

Petraeus, who is to deliver congressional testimony on the surge beginning September 10, indicated that the troop buildup would continue until at least next spring. However, according to a September 7 report in the *New York Times*, Petraeus has also indicated that he is willing to accept a reduction of 4,000 troops beginning in January.

This figure, equivalent to one brigade, would not have a significant impact on military operations. Rather, senior administration and military officials have made clear that such a reduction would be primarily a symbolic gesture, a token to accommodate leaders in Congress and the military who have adopted a more critical posture toward the surge.

Many among the military brass recognize that even at present surge levels, US troops are extremely overstretched and cannot contain popular resistance, let alone function as a stabilizing force in the region.

Petraeus has already made known he will not consider a return to “pre-surge” levels before the end of Bush’s term. As he told the *Boston Globe* Friday, “Based on the progress our forces are achieving, I expect to be able to recommend that some of our forces will be redeployed without replacement.”

Within the political and military establishment, concern over troop levels centers above all on preparing for potential invasions elsewhere, particularly Iran. Disagreements over the “drawing down” of troops have been limited to vague, elastic recommendations without timetables or funding reductions.

Retired General James Jones testified before the Senate armed services committee on Thursday as a representative of 20 former senior military and police officials. He bluntly ruled out a timeline for withdrawal as “against our national interest.” “I think deadlines can work against us,” he said.

Instead, the military commission recommended a reorganization of troops that would include a reduction of those stationed in Iraq. Jones’s testimony explained the tactical nature of this position: “Significant reductions, consolidations and realignments would appear to be possible and prudent.”

Of current troop levels, Jones stated, “The unintended message conveyed is one of ‘permanence,’ an occupying

force, as it were.... What is needed is the opposite impression: one that is lighter, less massive and more expeditionary.” Jones told the committee, “We recommend that careful consideration of the size of our national footprint in Iraq be reconsidered with regard to its efficiency, necessity and cost.”

Nine months after gaining the majority in Congress on the wave of mass popular opposition to the war, leading Democrats have strongly indicated they will not press for withdrawal. Michigan Democrat Carl Levin, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, is drafting a bill that calls for withdrawal to begin this year, but with no requirement or deadline for complete withdrawal.

The Senate majority leader, Nevada Democrat Harry Reid, told the press that the coming weeks would be “one of the last opportunities” to change policy course on Iraq. Yet, underscoring the unanimity of support for the occupation that exists between the major parties, Reid said the Democrats would not press for a timeline for withdrawal. “I don’t think we have to think that our way is the only way,” he told the *Washington Post*. “I’m not saying, ‘Republicans, do what we want to do.’ Just give me something that you think you would like to do, that accomplishes some or all of what I want to do.”

Typical of the willingness of many Democratic and Republican lawmakers to cede their authority on the war to the military itself were the comments of John McCain, the top-ranking Republican on the Armed Services Committee. “There’s a lot of people who are armchair generals who reside here in the air-conditioned comfort of Capitol Hill,” he said, “who somehow do not trust the judgment of some of the finest leaders that our nation has produced.”



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