

The state of Iraq as it enters 2008

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2 January 2008

Media reports about New Year parties in parts of Baghdad cannot disguise the fact that Iraqis have little to look forward to in 2008, and even less to celebrate about 2007. Last year was yet another of death, destruction and suffering. Even the incomplete data compiled by the Associated Press—which only include reported deaths and exclude so-called insurgents who were killed in combat with US and Iraqi government forces—show that at least 18,610 civilians died as a result of violence. Tens of thousands more deaths were caused by the effects of malnutrition, unsafe drinking water, depleted uranium contamination and a dysfunctional health system.

2007 will be remembered as the year in which the British-based polling agency ORB estimated that 1.2 million Iraqis had been killed under the US occupation, substantiating the death toll previously calculated by scientists working with Johns Hopkins University. It will also go down as the year when more than one million Iraqis were forced to flee their homes to escape the sectarian violence fomented and encouraged by the policies of US imperialism. The “surge” of 30,000 additional US troops to the country between March and June was accompanied by arguably the worst ethnic-communal cleansing in Iraq’s modern history.

UNICEF published statistics on December 21 revealing the level of social destruction: just 28 percent of Iraqi 17-year-olds sat for their final school exams in 2007 while the violence prevented close to one million children from attending primary school.

Such figures underscore the charge leveled by the WSWs on May 24, 2007 that the architects of the Iraq invasion had committed sociocide—“the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society”—in order to seize the country’s territory and oil resources for the benefit of the American corporate establishment. For these war crimes, the perpetrators in the Bush administration and allied governments must be brought

to account.

Thousands of American and British military families have paid a bitter price. More occupation troops were killed in Iraq in 2007 than any other year since the March 2003 invasion. A total of 901 American, 47 British and nine soldiers from other occupying countries lost their lives. Cumulative US casualties in the illegal war now stand at 3,904 dead and 28,661 wounded—many of whom have suffered brain damage, lost limbs or suffered other permanent injuries. A further 30,185 soldiers have had to be medically evacuated for “non-hostile” wounds, such as disease and psychological disorders. At least 132 American troops have committed suicide in the war-torn country.

2008 will see the killing and maiming continue. In his final press conference for the year on December 29, the American commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus poured cold water on declarations that the US troop “surge” had brought the country under US control. While noting the decline in US casualties over the previous three months—fatalities were the lowest since early 2004—he warned that “inevitably there will be tough fighting, more tough days and more tough weeks, but fewer of them, god willing”.

Petraeus’s warning stemmed from the clearly temporary nature of the modest lessening of risks for American troops. The ebb in attacks on occupation forces stems not from any change in the overwhelming Iraqi opposition to the US presence, or from any improvement in the catastrophic living conditions facing the majority of Iraqis. Rather, it flows from a series of desperate deals, orchestrated by Petraeus, to buy off a number of largely Sunni Arab-based insurgent groups and secure a ceasefire with the main Shiite fundamentalist opposition to the occupation, the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

These deals are beginning to unravel. There are at least 77,000 Sunni militiamen being paid by the US

military in western Iraq and in Sunni enclaves inside and around Baghdad. Their leaders, many of whom have links to the previous Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, are seeking a greater political role through a sordid sectarian power-sharing arrangement with the Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties that dominate the US puppet government in Baghdad. In the process, all factions are setting themselves in direct opposition to the hopes and aspirations of ordinary Iraqi working people of all sects and ethnic groups.

Already, some two million Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan are being told they cannot necessarily return home. Whether they can or not will depend on whether they belong to the same sect as the one whose militia now controls their home suburb. Thousands of Shiites are being prevented from entering areas under Sunni militia authority and which are, in many cases, sealed off by US-erected 12-foot concrete walls. At the same time, tens of thousands of Sunnis and Christians driven out by Shiite militias face losing everything. The Mahdi Army, as part of Sadr's deal with Petraeus, has taken over large swathes of Baghdad and rules it as a sectarian fiefdom on behalf of the cleric.

Anger at the US-negotiated carve-up of the city and the elevation of militias is amplified by the inability of the occupation to provide jobs or basic services. Combined unemployment and underemployment in areas such as Sadr City stands at up to 70 percent, and new outbreaks of resistance are inevitable.

Across the Shiite-populated south of Iraq, the situation is equally volatile. Sadr's arrangement with the occupation has meant, in practical terms, abandoning his predominantly working class supporters to the US military and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC)—the largest pro-occupation Shiite party and the representative of the most powerful Shiite business and clerical elites. As a result, hundreds of Sadrist militiamen have been branded “rogue elements”, hunted down and detained or killed.

Observers of Iraqi politics are noting the growth of disaffection within the Sadrist base over the consequences of Sadr's horse-trading and collaboration with the US forces. Peter Harling of the International Crisis Group told McClatchy Newspapers last month: “I don't know how sustainable this can be. They [Sadr's supporters] appear extremely frustrated, willing

to comply with Moqtada's decision [the ceasefire], but not for very long.”

According to an article in the December 26 *Washington Post*, large numbers have been rounded up in Najaf, Karbala, Hilla and Diwaniya. There are indications that the US military, along with Iraqi government forces loyal to SIIC, are preparing a crackdown against Sadrist and Sadrist-linked parties, militias and unions in the oil-rich city of Basra. The operation has the potential to be the first major blood-letting of the New Year and to unleash anti-occupation rebellions across southern Iraq.

As the killing continues, various quarters of the US ruling elite are exploiting the very carnage they have produced to argue that American forces must remain in Iraq to establish the conditions for “democracy”. Such propaganda is nothing more than a shameless apology for the first great and ongoing war crime of the twenty-first century. The occupation is ruling through the promotion of sectarian divisions and the daily repression of opposition to its presence. The precondition for Iraq's recovery from the social and political catastrophe created by the US-led war is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all American and foreign troops.



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