

US military deaths in Iraq reach 4,000

Eight US soldiers and dozens of Iraqis killed in weekend violence

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At least eight US soldiers were killed in Iraq over the weekend, amid a resurgence of violence underscoring the instability of the US-led military occupation. The number of US soldiers who have died in Iraq now stands at 4,000.

Seven soldiers were killed in two separate roadside bombs in Baghdad, one on Saturday and one on Sunday. The eighth was killed by “indirect fire”—mortar shells or rockets—on Friday south of Baghdad, according to the US military. So far, 27 US soldiers have been killed in the month of March.

Dozens of Iraqis were killed over the weekend in suicide bombings, and in raids carried out by the US.

The US military stated that it killed 17 and captured another 30 in operations centered in Baquba, about 30 miles northeast of Baghdad. According to the Associated Press, “Iraqi police reported a dozen civilians killed in an airstrike” in Baquba, but the military said that all those killed were “insurgents.”

Again according to the military, five Iraqis with alleged ties to Al Qaeda were killed near the border with Iran. None of the claims of affiliation can be taken at face value, however. The US government has renewed efforts in recent weeks to fabricate ties between Iran and Al Qaeda, which could be used as a pretext for some form of military operation against Iran.

In another incident near Samarra on Saturday, the US killed six Iraqis who were apparently members of the “Sons of Iraq,” also known as the Awakening Councils. These are Sunni groups that have made an alliance with the US occupation. US military forces said that they fired on the Iraqis after they were found “conducting suspicious terrorist activity in an area historically known for improvised explosive device emplacement.”

The *New York Times* quoted Abu Farouk, a leader of the Awakening Council in Samarra, as saying, “American

forces said that the people they killed were gunmen, but they were my men, and they were even wearing Awakening uniforms.”

Details of the incident are still unclear, but the shooting underscores both the ease with which US forces fire on Iraqis and kill indiscriminately, and the tenuous character of the alliance with the Sunni groups. Many of those in the councils until recently were fighting against the US occupation. The members of these organizations are now paid about \$300 a month by the US.

In another incident, rocket attacks on the Green Zone government compound in Baghdad killed 10 Iraqis when missiles landed in nearby neighborhoods. The Associated Press commented that the attacks were “the most sustained assault in months against the nerve center of the US mission.”

A suicide truck bombing killed 13 Iraqi soldiers and injured 42 others in Mosul. A separate gun attack in Baghdad’s Zaafariniya district killed seven and wounded 16, and another suicide bombing in northwestern Baghdad killed seven.

Attacks on the Green Zone have become less frequent in recent months, due in part to the ceasefire negotiated between the US occupying forces and the Mehdi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr renewed the ceasefire last month, but there are sharp divisions within the largely impoverished Shiite population that forms his base and is intensely hostile to the occupation.

Reuters commented, “The ceasefire may be unraveling after Mehdi Army fighters clashed with Iraqi and US forces in the southern city of Kut and southern Baghdad last week.”

The US and coalition forces are planning for major operations in the Shiite-dominated south, including the city of Basra. The British *Sunday Mirror* reported that the

US has asked British forces to prepare a “surge” into Basra. The newspaper quoted an unnamed senior US military source as saying that after US operations in Mosul, “The plan is to turn the coalition’s attention to Basra and we will be urging the British to surge into the city. If they do not have enough troops, then they will be offered US Marines to help out.”

The renewed violence comes only a few days after a speech by US President George W. Bush marking the fifth anniversary of the US invasion. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have issued repeated statements defending the extremely unpopular war, and pledging the continued presence of elevated numbers of US soldiers indefinitely.

Senior military commanders are set to present Bush with a proposal to maintain 140,000 soldiers in Iraq at least through the summer and likely far longer. This figure is slightly higher than the number in Iraq prior to the beginning of the “surge” last year. The recommendations will be formally presented to Bush this week.

A few brigades are scheduled to be withdrawn from the peak force of about 170,000. Citing military and government officials, the *New York Times* reported on Saturday that General David Petraeus, the head of US forces in Iraq, and other officials “have made it clear that they want more time to assess what happens after the withdrawals are completed, leaving 15 combat brigades.”

Petraeus and figures in the Bush administration are concerned that even a partial withdrawal of American firepower could lead to a resurgence of resistance to the occupation along with sectarian conflict.

Deep divisions are developing within the military and political establishment, however. In particular, there is substantial concern within the military brass, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that the integrity of the military has become severely compromised due to the strain of the Iraq war. In a partial concession to these views, the Pentagon will likely announce that troop rotations will be reduced to 12 months from their currently elevated level of 15 months.

Last month, Admiral William J. Fallon, the leader of US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia, resigned. Fallon reportedly wanted more withdrawals from Iraq and had also publicly opposed US action against Iran.

A Pentagon spokesman said on Saturday that the military would not allow Fallon to testify before the Senate Armed Services Committee next month. The

testimony had been requested by Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, who is on the committee.

Several members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including its chairman, Admiral Michael Mullen, reportedly have similar views as those more openly expressed by Fallon.

Reporting on these divisions March 20, the *Los Angeles Times* commented, “In the short run, supporters of Petraeus would like to see about 140,000 troops, including 15 combat brigades, remain in Iraq through the end of the Bush administration. Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their advisors favor a faster drawdown. Some are pushing for a reduction to 12 brigades or fewer by January 2009, which would amount to approximately 120,000 troops, depending on the configuration of forces.”

The newspaper went on to note, “In part, the differences between Petraeus and the Joint Chiefs—and in particular their chairman, Navy Adm. Michael G. Mullen—are a function of their different responsibilities. Petraeus’s main task is to win the war in Iraq. Mullen and the Joint Chiefs have the primary responsibility of ensuring the long-term strength of the military and preparing for contingencies,” i.e., for future wars.

These are about the extent of the differences within the political establishment over Iraq policy. The Iraq war has been a disaster for American imperialism and is creating sharp conflicts within the ruling elite. The leading Democratic candidates have called for a limited withdrawal of US forces, positions they have sought to present as opposition to the war.

All of the factions, however, take as their starting point the necessity of securing the interests of the American ruling class in the Middle East and internationally.



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