

# Five years after “mission accomplished,” sharp rise in Iraqi and US casualties

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May 1 marked the fifth anniversary of the infamous “mission accomplished” speech delivered by President George W. Bush aboard a US aircraft carrier. Five years after what Bush proclaimed to be the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq, US casualties have reached a seven-month high, while the Iraqi death toll continues to mount.

In April, 52 US troops were killed in Iraq, the highest number since last September. The bulk of the casualties came in Baghdad, mostly in the crowded Shia slum neighborhoods of Sadr City. The sharp rise in US dead and wounded, and the far greater death and destruction being inflicted on Iraqi civilians, is the result of a month-old offensive launched by US and Iraqi puppet forces against the Mahdi Army, the militia loyal to nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Citing “security officials,” Agence France-Presse said that 1,073 Iraqis were killed last month. This is undoubtedly a gross underestimation of the real death toll. One hospital alone in Sadr City reported taking in 400 bodies.

The two major hospitals in the area, which is home to more than 2 million people, said that they had received nearly 2,500 wounded. The medical facilities are overwhelmed with the number of casualties. They report that they lack sufficient numbers of severe trauma specialists to treat the wounded and are running low on basic supplies, including clean water.

“The situation is very critical and unstable,” Abbas Owaid, director-general of Fatima al-Zahra hospital told the United Nations news agency IRIN. “There is still a pressing need for bandages, pain killers, syringes and other first aid materials. Blood is available as there are people who donate, but we still need more as there are injuries.”

Owaid said that ambulances were coming under attack and that patients and staff alike were prevented from reaching his hospital because US-backed Iraqi forces had taken up positions nearby.

A senior military official at the Pentagon used a press briefing Wednesday to assert that the sharp climb in casualties did not indicate an unraveling of the US “surge,” the escalation of the American intervention that sent another 30,000 troops into the occupied country last year.

“While it is sad to see an increase in casualties, again, I don’t think it is necessarily indicative of a major change in the operating environment, at least from the US perspective,” said Lt. Gen. Carter Ham, director for operations of the military’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. He added, “When the level of fighting increases, then,

sadly, the level of casualties does tend to rise.” He stressed that the US military had never made a decline in casualties “*The* measure of how things are progressing in Iraq.”

On the contrary, both the Pentagon and the White House were until recently lauding the relative decline in the carnage against the Iraqi people and the reduced number of US soldiers killed in action as proof of the “surge’s” success. Now, the US military is providing daily body counts in which it invariably describes all those killed as “criminals” and “terrorists.” Hospitals receiving the victims, however, report that the bulk of them are civilians, including large numbers of women and children.

The military has been ordered to achieve a political objective deemed crucial for rescuing Washington’s faltering attempt to impose colonial domination over the oil-rich country. It is to take on and defeat the Mahdi Army and thereby weaken the Sadrist, who have voiced opposition to both the US occupation and the bid to open up Iraq’s oil reserves to exploitation by US-based energy conglomerates. The aim is to complete this task before October provincial elections, which Sadr’s followers would otherwise be expected to win in the key southern provinces that contain the bulk of Iraq’s oil assets.

To carry out this task, Washington is prepared to spill as much Iraqi blood as it takes, and to accept a sizeable increase in American casualties as well. One result has been a steady increase in the number of flag-draped coffins returning to towns and cities across America. The news of these individual tragedies is confined to the local media, with the real cost of this criminal war largely concealed from the American people.

Among those who last month lost their lives in the five-year-old war to conquer Iraq were the following:

\* Army Specialist David P. McCormick, 26, who died as a result of wounds suffered in a rocket attack April 28. The soldier’s longtime friend and minister, Mike Zimmerman, described him as “a pretty quiet person,” who was “looking forward to getting out” and wanted to go to college for business administration.

\* Air Force Technical Sergeant Anthony Capra, 31, who died April 9 from wounds inflicted by a roadside bomb. Capra, who is survived by a wife and five children, was serving his fourth tour of duty in Iraq.

\* Sergeant Jesse Ault, a national guardsman from Virginia, who died April 9 from wounds resulting from an improvised explosive device (IED). He had left the guard, but when his wife, also a guard member, was recalled for a second tour in Iraq, he re-

enlisted in order to take her place and allow her to stay with their children. “I’ve got to do what’s best for my family,” he told his father.

\* Army Sergeant Shaun Paul Tousha, 30, who was killed by an IED on April 9. He was the 100th military fatality from the Houston, Texas area. His sister Becky, reflecting on the mounting death toll, told the *Houston Chronicle*, “I think they ought to bring our boys home and call it quits.”

\* Jacob Fairbanks, 22, of St. Paul, Minnesota, who died in Iraq on April 9. He had been sent back for a 15-month tour shortly after he and his wife, Dwan, had a new baby. Dwan told the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* that he had been plagued by a feeling of dread. “What if I don’t come back this time?” he told her. The Pentagon listed the cause of death as a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

\* Staff Sergeant Jeremiah McNeal, 23, of the Virginia National Guard, who died April 6 from wounds caused by an IED. “He joined the National Guard soon after [high school] graduation to support his mother and three younger siblings,” the *Virginian Pilot* reported. “He was not just another number,” his wife Nikita told the media.

\* Private First Class Shane Penley, 19, who was killed April 6 by a sniper’s bullet just short of a year after graduating from Bloom Trail High School in Illinois. According to the local newspaper, the *Southtown Star*, he “joined the Army because he was frustrated trying to find a good job” after waiting on tables in a local restaurant. His three sisters, the paper reported, had tried to talk him out of enlisting.

\* Major Stuart Wolfer, 36, who was killed in an April 6 rocket attack on the fortified Green Zone, where the US Embassy and Iraqi government buildings are located. He is survived by a wife and three children. When Representative Robert Wexler (Democrat of Florida) invited his constituents to submit questions for last month’s congressional testimony by the US Iraq war commander, General David Petraeus, Len Wolfer, the soldier’s father, requested that he ask Petraeus, ““ For what? For what had he lost his son?”

The names of the victims of American Hellfire missiles, bombs and machine gun fire in the crowded streets of Sadr City are for the most part unknown outside of Iraq, and are far more numerous. Thanks to a wrenching Associated Press photograph, the identity of one has been publicized. He is Ali Hussein, aged two.

A photographer captured the image of his lifeless, chalk-covered body being lifted from the rubble of his home, which had been destroyed in a US rocket attack. Mouth agape and limbs hanging limp, the little boy wore a T-shirt, blood-stained shorts and a child’s sandals.

As these crimes continued to unfold, the White House took the occasion of the fifth anniversary of Bush’s “mission accomplished” speech to invent a new defense of the American president’s grotesquely unfounded assessment of the situation in Iraq.

In what was obviously a scripted remark aimed at preempting inevitable media references to the anniversary, White House Press Secretary Dana Perino told a news conference: “President Bush is well aware that the banner should have been much more specific

and said ‘mission accomplished’ for these sailors who are on this ship on their mission. And we have certainly paid a price for not being more specific on that banner.”

This is, of course, all nonsense. The banner, together with Bush’s tailhook landing on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln and his strutting before the cameras in a pilot’s flight suit, were all carefully choreographed to sell the success of the Iraq war and American militarism to the public. The banner itself was produced by a private contractor with White House assistance.

The remarks made by Bush on that occasion were fully in keeping with the two-word slogan. “In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed,” he told his captive audience of sailors. “And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country.”

Moreover, barely one month later, he used the same words emblazoned on the banner in a speech to US troops in Qatar. “America sent you on a mission to remove a grave threat and to liberate an oppressed people,” he said, “and that mission has been accomplished.”

At that point, the Bush administration and most of the American ruling elite believed they would be able to quickly solidify their grip over Iraq, install a puppet regime and use the country’s oil wealth to pay for the war and strengthen US capitalism.

At the time, the *World Socialist Web Site* foresaw that there would be no such easy road for US imperialism’s colonial-style venture in Iraq.

“In reality, of course, the killing is far from over,” the WSWS stated on May 2, 2003. “Pentagon officials acknowledge that there is no prospect of reducing the current number of US troops in Iraq—close to 140,000—for years to come. There is, in short, no ‘exit strategy,’ but rather a plan for permanent colonial occupation.

“Some of the greatest US war crimes lie ahead as Washington attempts to suppress popular opposition to its imposition of a puppet regime to rule the Iraqi people in the interests of the US oil companies, banks and corporations.”

This warning has been tragically confirmed. Close to 97 percent of US casualties have been suffered since Bush delivered his speech, while the bloodbath suffered by the Iraqi people over the same period has dwarfed the considerable carnage inflicted during the “shock and awe” stage of the US invasion. According to the best demographic estimates, at least a million Iraqi lives have been lost as a result of the US intervention.



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