

Five US soldiers killed amid wave of violence in Iraq

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Five US soldiers were killed in a wave of violence that claimed at least 20 other lives across Iraq Monday. It was the worst single-day combat death toll for US occupation forces since April 2009.

US military officials provided neither the names of the soldiers killed nor any details of the attack, saying only that it took place in central Iraq. Iraqi officials, however, revealed that the deaths were the result of a rocket attack on Camp Victory, a US-built base near Baghdad's international airport. Five rockets were fired into the facility, striking near living quarters of the US troops. In addition to the dead, at least five US military personnel were wounded.

The deaths in the Camp Victory attack brings to 29 the number of US troops killed in Iraq this year. The total number of American troops killed since the US invaded Iraq over eight years ago now stands at 4,459. The number of Iraqi lives lost during the same period is estimated at over one million.

Also on Monday, nine Iraqi soldiers and three civilians were killed in a car bomb attack on the so-called "Green Zone" of Tikrit, the capital of the predominantly Sunni province of Salaheddin and the birthplace of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi president toppled by the 2003 US invasion and executed more than two-and-a-half years later. The compound had served as a palace and offices for Hussein, and has since been converted into headquarters for various security agencies.

The Tikrit bombing killed a senior Iraqi military intelligence official, Nuri Sabeah al-Mashhadani. It was the second major attack in Tikrit in three days. Last Friday, twin bomb attacks on the Tikrit mosque after prayer services killed 21 people and wounded more than 70 others.

The US troops killed at Camp Victory were reportedly part of a unit that is training Iraqi paramilitary police.

The missile strike is part of a general upsurge in attacks on US forces in Iraq, particularly in the south of the country. These attacks come little more than six months before these forces, which now number approximately 48,000, are scheduled to withdraw from Iraq under a Status of Forces

Agreement (SOFA) signed between Washington and the US-backed regime of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in 2008.

The attacks have been attributed to Shiite militias that oppose the US presence and any attempt to extend it. There is also growing unrest among Sunni elements that had aligned themselves with the US occupation in what was referred to as the "Sunni Awakening." These militias are now being abandoned to their fate by the US occupation, while jobs that had been promised them by the Iraqi government have never fully materialized.

While the violence is linked to the continued US presence and political and sectarian tension unleashed by the US invasion and occupation, it is being seized upon by US officials and the media as an argument to extend the presence of US troops beyond the December 31, 2011 deadline.

"Monday's deaths raise questions about that timeline," CNN reported.

Wall Street Journal columnist Max Boot, a prominent neo-conservative advocate of the Iraq war, argued that the missile attack was the work of "Iranian-backed forces" and that pulling out US troops as scheduled would only strengthen Iran.

"It is imperative that responsible leaders in both the US and Iraq not give the extremists what they want," wrote Boot in a column posted on the *Commentary* web site. "These attacks are all the more reason to extend the security agreement in order to build on the substantial progress that has been made since the 2007-2008 surge."

Such arguments follow repeated warnings, issued both publicly and not for attribution, from political officials and senior US military officers that American troops should remain in Iraq beyond next December's deadline.

At a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing on Iraq last week, the panel's Republican chairman, Representative Steve Chabot of Ohio, concluded that "the politicians in Iraq are going to have to step up to the plate as well, because for the United States to pull out by the end of this year and turn over... the future of that country before they're ready could

literally have defeat out of the jaws of victory.”

Representative Gary Ackerman of New York, the ranking Democrat on the subcommittee, reached a similar conclusion, commenting, “Most Americans believe we’re done in Iraq. That is at odds with the reality in Iraq.” Ackerman, acknowledging the overwhelming popular hostility to extending the US occupation, argued that the Obama administration had to put an official in charge of convincing Congress that it is necessary. “If no one’s selling it, no one’s buying it,” he said.

Reportedly under back-channel discussion between US and Iraqi officials is a proposal for upwards of 20,000 US troops to remain in the country, continuing training operations as well as the special forces counterinsurgency raids that take place on a daily basis. This reduced force would serve as an anchor for US domination over the country.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates issued an open appeal for continuing the occupation in a speech before the American Enterprise Institute late last month. The continued presence of US troops on the ground in Iraq, he argued, was vital to US interests throughout the Middle East because it would “send a powerful signal to the region that we’re not leaving.”

The US ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, last week claimed that there were “no negotiations between the United States and Iraq” on extending the US troop presence, but that Washington was awaiting the “results of dialogues among the Iraqi political blocs.”

Asked whether Iran and Al Qaeda could take advantage of the US military’s withdrawal from the country, Jeffrey replied that this was a “frightening” prospect, but that the US would “exert every effort to fight Al Qaeda in Iraq, so long as the Iraqi government wanted that.”

Prime Minister Maliki announced last month that the Iraqi parliament must discuss and reach a consensus on any proposal to extend the occupation, a prospect that is strongly opposed by the vast majority of the Iraqi population.

Late last month, tens of thousands of Iraqis joined a demonstration organized by supporters of the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to oppose any US troop presence after the end of this year. Marching through Baghdad’s predominantly Shiite area of Sadr City in military formation, the demonstrators chanted, “No to the occupation!” and, “The people want the occupier to leave!”

Sadr, whose party is a prominent member of Maliki’s coalition government, has threatened to reactivate his Medhi Army militia, which fought several battles with US forces, if the occupation is not ended on schedule.

In addition to the threat of popular upheavals over the continuation of the American occupation, the Maliki

government is facing the prospect of renewed protests over the social and economic conditions in the country, political repression and government corruption.

Security forces have rounded up dozens of known dissidents in the past week in an attempt to squelch a revival of protests that were violently repressed last February. The anticipation that demonstrators will take to the streets again is driven in part by the government’s self-imposed June 7 deadline for its ministries to crack down on corruption and improve performance in providing services to the population. While the repression has continued, there has been no change in the corrupt workings of Maliki’s government, and conditions of poverty, price rises and mass unemployment continue.

The latest US troop casualties came just days after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hosted a Business Forum Promoting Commercial Opportunities in Iraq at the US State Department. Participating were government officials and representatives of US businesses, led by Occidental Petroleum and other major energy conglomerates.

The thrust of Clinton’s remarks were that, while China, Iran, Turkey and other countries were securing contracts in Iraq, US corporations thus far had little presence in the US-occupied country.

Urging increased US investment and pledging government support for corporations operating in Iraq, Clinton told the assembled business representatives, “Now, one reason there are so many opportunities is because Iraq remains a tough environment. There are still significant security challenges, bottlenecks in infrastructure, unclear regulations, and, unfortunately, corruption.”

After more than eight years of warfare that has cost the lives of nearly 4,500 US troops and is expected to cost the US economy some \$3 trillion, the US ruling elite fears that Iran is poised to reap the political benefits and that American capitalism’s regional and global rivals will outstrip the US in relation to the economic spoils. These are the underlying concerns driving the discussion about keeping US troops in Iraq.



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