

Spinning the Iraq War Death Toll

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Global Research, August 13, 2007

consortiumnews.com 10 August 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Mindful of the political fallout from a rising American death toll in Iraq, the U.S. military has pulled back from widespread use of aggressive tactics on the ground this summer, helping to explain a modest reduction in the number of soldiers killed in July, according to intelligence and military sources.

The number of U.S. military fatalities declined to 80 in July after three months of a death toll in the triple digits (104 in April, 126 in May, and 101 in June). The lower death toll has been cited by some U.S. commanders in Iraq and Bush administration supporters in Washington as a sign that President George W. Bush's "surge" of U.S. troops is working.

But the sources told me that the lower death toll reflects not some impending victory but just a slowdown in the U.S. ground offensive after the early phases of the surge, which poured more than 20,000 additional troops into Iraq. The sources cited a variety of factors contributing to the decline in U.S. casualties.

One U.S. military source said the American troops have not pushed as far from their forward operating bases as the U.S. news media has been led to believe. When Bush unveiled the surge, a key goal was to get American forces out of their secure bases and into small police outposts in Iraqi neighborhoods.

The exposure of U.S. troops to the additional hazard of such front-line assignments was a factor in the upswing of American deaths in the early months of the surge. This forward positioning also presented risks for U.S. logistical personnel who had to brave roadside bombs and ambushes to supply these isolated units.

Further complicating those assignments was the brutal summer heat - reaching temperatures of 130 degrees - at a time when electricity in many Iraqi neighborhoods is spotty at best. By slowing or postponing these deployments, the dangers to the troops - not to mention their discomfort - were reduced.

Still, this source said the decline in violent incidents involving U.S. troops could be viewed as a combination of two factors - a drop-off in activity by the Iraqi insurgency as well as a pull-back by the Americans.

Another source said the precise reason for the reduced U.S. military activity inside Iraq wasn't entirely clear, but noted that the slowdown in the Iraqi theater was in sharp contrast to more aggressive operations in Afghanistan.

A decline in American activity in Iraq also has been noted by Israeli intelligence, another source said, raising some concern in Tel Aviv that the U.S. military was shying away from

offensive operations to avoid higher casualties that would further undermine political support for the war in the United States.

The source said some Israeli officials want the Americans to keep taking the fight to the enemy.

July Heat

It's also possible that the brutal heat has a lot to do with the slower pace of the fighting, by discouraging operations by both guerrillas and U.S. troops. Since the war began, July has been one of the least deadly months for U.S. troops.

Indeed, compared to earlier July casualty reports, the July 2007 death toll of 80 was the worst of the war for U.S. troops. In July 2003, 48 American soldiers died; in July 2004, the death toll was 54; in July 2005, it was 54; in July 2006, it was 43. [For details, see icasualties.org.]

U.S. military officials and Bush administration war supporters, however, have cited the decline in American deaths this July – compared with the previous three months – as one of several positive indicators that Bush's surge strategy is making progress.

These supporters also have hailed signs of increased cooperation with Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar province, once considered an insurgent stronghold. Over the past few weeks, the U.S. military has escorted analysts from several Washington think tanks to areas of relative calm in Iraq, leading to some glowing reports.

Typical was an op-ed piece in the New York Times by Michael E. O'Hanlon and Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution, who portrayed themselves as tough critics of the Bush administration's strategy who, after a visit to Iraq, concluded that Bush's surge was succeeding.

"As two analysts who have harshly criticized the Bush administration's miserable handling of Iraq, we were surprised by the gains we saw and the potential to produce not necessarily 'victory' but a sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with," O'Hanlon and Pollack wrote in an article entitled "A War We Just Might Win."

Yet the authors – and the New York Times – failed to tell readers the full story about these supposed skeptics: far from grizzled peaceniks, O'Hanlon and Pollack have been longtime cheerleaders for a larger U.S. military occupying force in Iraq.

Pollack, a former CIA analyst, was a leading advocate for invading Iraq in the first place. He published *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* in September 2002, just as the Bush administration was gearing up its marketing push for going to war.

British journalist Robert Fisk called Pollack's book the "most meretricious contribution to this utterly fraudulent [war] 'debate' in the United States." (Meretricious refers to something that is based on pretense, deception or insincerity.) [See Fisk's *The Great War for Civilization*]

Cautious Report

Another think tank analyst, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, returned from the same trip with a somewhat less optimistic assessment.

Cordesman wrote: "From my perspective, the U.S. now has only uncertain, high-risk options in Iraq. It cannot dictate Iraq's future, only influence it, and this presents serious problems at a time when the Iraqi political process has failed to move forward in reaching either a new consensus or some form of peaceful coexistence. ...

"So far, Iraq's national government has failed to act at the rate necessary to move the country forward or give American military action political meaning."

Nevertheless, the Bush administration seems certain to tout whatever fragile positive developments can be discerned, to secure a new round of funding from Congress in September.

But the détente with those Sunni tribal leaders may turn out to be short-lived, especially if they conclude the U.S. occupation is helping the Shiite majority consolidate its power in Baghdad and its control over the nation's oil wealth.

The Shiite-dominated government is showing little inclination to make meaningful concessions to the Sunnis. Despite stern warnings from Defense Secretary Robert Gates, the Iraqi parliament adjourned for a month-long recess, leaving unresolved legislative disputes about sharing oil revenues and giving Sunnis a bigger stake in the government.

The grim future of Iraq might be foretold by conditions in the southern Shiite city of Basra, which once was regarded as a success story. As British forces were driven back into fortresses – and now are eying a full-scale withdrawal – the region became a battleground with various Shiite factions at war.

As the Washington Post reported, "Shiite militias there have escalated a violent battle against each other for political supremacy and control over oil revenues, deepening concerns among some U.S. officials in Baghdad that elements of Iraq's Shiite-dominated national government will turn on one another once U.S. troops begin to draw down.

"Three major Shiite political groups are locked in a bloody conflict that has left the city [of Basra] in the hands of militias and criminal gangs, whose control extends to municipal offices and neighborhood streets." [Washington Post, Aug. 7, 2007]

To sustain even a modest degree of public support for the war, President Bush increasingly has relied on the argument that – as bad as the situation on Iraq is now – it would get worse if U.S. forces left.

Yet, however one cuts it, the future of Iraq looks bleak. In one telling passage from Cordesman's [trip report](#), he described plans to address the disorder in Iraq by locking up tens of thousands of Iraqis, overwhelmingly Sunnis.

"The detainees have risen to over 18,000 and are projected to hit 30,000 (by the U.S. command) by the end of the year and 50,000 by the end of 2008," Cordesman wrote. "Shiite detainees are often freed while Sunnis are warehoused."

In other words, Bush's policy in Iraq appears headed toward replacing Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated police state which persecuted Shiites with an even more expansive police

state run by the Shiites persecuting Sunnis.

Once the Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar get a whiff of what's in store for their religious brethren, they might reverse themselves again on their attitudes toward their new American friends.

In his report, Cordesman also put the Iraqi death toll from the war at more than 100,000. However, some estimates that count Iraqis who died unnecessarily due to the war's chaos have put that total at more than a half million.

If Bush's Iraq policies continue much longer - and the war turns even uglier - those staggering numbers could represent just a down payment in blood and misery. Years from now, the American people may find little solace from the pro-war spin point that the July 2007 death toll for U.S. troops was *only* 80.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

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