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## **THE IRAQ WAR IN CONTEXT**

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Internal US military logs on the Iraq War released by Wikileaks on 22 October have raised numerous issues about coalition behaviour, including attacks on civilians, as well as collusion in covering up the abuse and killing of prisoners. The document releases also show that coalition forces kept numerous records of civilian casualties while claiming that “*We do not do body counts*”. On this issue, a full analysis of the vast number of records will take many months, but extensive work already undertaken by Iraq Body Count - a partner organisation of ORG - shows that the logs contain details of at least 15,000 civilian deaths not previously recorded. Adding the new information to the careful monitoring carried out by IBC since the war started, indicates that around 150,000 violent deaths related to the conflict have been recorded since the war began, with 122,000 of them being civilian.

While the majority of all the civilian deaths resulted from insurgent action or because of the extensive inter-communal conflict that developed after the initial occupation, some tens of thousands stemmed from coalition military action. Furthermore, once Iraq had been occupied by US and other coalition forces, those forces were legally responsible for maintaining order in what was now an occupied territory. This they failed to do.

If lessons are to be learnt from the Iraq War, among the key questions are, why were so many civilians killed by coalition forces, and why were the coalition forces unable to contain the rapidly developing insurgency? There is enough information available to provide answers to these questions, but much of the analysis has to relate to events unfolding right at the start of the war.

### **Expectations**

Although it is commonly believed that the cause of the problems faced by the Coalition forces in Iraq was a lack of post-war planning, in reality there was a very clear vision of what would happen once the Saddam Hussein regime had been terminated. The occupation was to be run from the Pentagon, rather than the State Department, a Coalition Provisional Authority would be established that was directly responsible to the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and all the old Iraqi government ministries would initially be headed by coalition personnel. By June 2003, three months after the invasion, Paul Bremer had been appointed Head of the CPA and there was then a clear expectation of how Iraq would develop. This would be on full free market lines, the aim being to have a pro-western administration established in Baghdad that would oversee the privatisation of nationalised industries and the opening up of Iraq to foreign investment with a flat-rate tax system and a minimum of financial regulation.

Iraq would thus develop into a model free market economy that might be followed, in due course, across the region. The Department of Defense also looked to establish four large permanent military bases, ensuring long-term Iraqi security while constraining any of Iran’s regional ambitions. Given the extent of the Persian Gulf oil reserves – over 60% of world totals – this would be particularly valuable in relation to long-term US security interests. All of these ambitions were predicated on an easy overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime and on the presumption that such radical change would be widely welcomed by the Iraqis.

It is also essential to remember that regime termination in Iraq was seen within the US military as a direct response to 9/11 . In his January 2002 State of the Union address President George W Bush had extended the concept of the war on terror against al-Qaida to encompass an “axis of evil” of states supporting terrorism and developing weapons of mass destruction, with Iraq the most immediate threat.

The war started within 18 months of 9/11, and the US Army and Marines entering Iraq saw it entirely in this context. To them, any opposition to what they saw as the fully justified response to the attacks on the twin towers and the Pentagon was not viewed as resistance to occupation but as terrorism.

### Outcomes

Right from the start of the war on 20 March 2003, these presumptions were turned on their head. By the time the US forces had occupied Baghdad, just three weeks later, military units right across southern Iraq were facing serious opposition from large numbers of irregular Iraqi forces. The first suicide bomb attack on a US unit happened in the second week of the war, and so great was the threat to the crucial supply lines through from Kuwait to Baghdad that the equivalent of three Army brigades were diverted to protect the supply lines. This was approximately 30% of all the available combat troops and represented a completely different dynamic to that anticipated by the planners.

Almost from the start, there were incidents of US forces facing paramilitary attacks and responding with heavy use of firepower, resulting in civilian deaths and injuries. This was little reported at the time, in the near-euphoria of an apparently easy dismantling of the regime. However, the practice of embedding journalists with military units did mean that some accounts surfaced at a very early stage, even if largely ignored by analysts at the time. In one incident, within a few hours of a Marines advance into Baghdad, the *International Herald Tribune* published one example:

*Caught in the crossfire, according to a chilling account by an Associated Press reporter, were a number of pedestrians, including an old man with a cane, looking confused. When he failed to heed three warning shots by the Marines, they killed him. A red van and an orange-and-white taxi were also riddled with bullets after they failed to heed warning shots.*

As the war progressed over the next year, the US Army and Marines Corps found themselves facing a very heavily embedded insurgency fighting in a largely urban environment. This was almost entirely unexpected and was being faced by forces primarily trained for conventional combat rather than urban counter-insurgency.

Moreover, the attitude of the US forces was affected by the nature of the casualties. In conventional warfare during the Vietnam era, a very large proportion of seriously injured troops died on the battlefield. For every soldier killed, three might survive with serious injuries. By the time of the Iraq War, huge improvements in battlefield medicine, rapid casualty evacuation and body armour meant that far more seriously injured troops survived. They often did so, though, with appalling injuries, especially to the face, throat and groin, and with the loss of limbs. Young soldiers and Marines therefore saw many of their comrades affected in this way, and the psychological impact was great.

Moreover, they saw the people inflicting these deaths and terrible injuries as terrorists opposing an entirely justified operation by a country that had suffered a massive attack on its own civilians. As a consequence, and as the war developed during 2003 and 2004, it became more and more common for US forces to rely heavily on one of their few military advantages over the insurgents – their overwhelming firepower whether delivered by artillery, multiple rocket launchers, helicopter gun-ships or strike aircraft.

Some scattered evidence of this trend emerged slowly, usually through reports from embedded journalists, but the full impact was scarcely recognised in the United States or Western Europe. One incident which illustrates the nature of the conflict was reported on 15 April 2004 by a foreign correspondent with the *Washington Post*, Pamela Constable. She was attached to a Marines unit operating in the city of Fallujah, west of Baghdad. The city was becoming a centre of the insurgency and on one occasion a supply convoy was edging towards a Marines post on the edge of the US-controlled

area of the city when it was attacked, some of the vehicles becoming isolated within a built-up area. A large rescue column was organised, with tanks and strike aircraft in support, and this fought a three-hour battle with insurgents before the Marines in the original convoy could withdraw safely, albeit with some injuries.

At least 20 insurgents were reported killed when the conflict finally ended at dusk but the rescue operation was seen as a success. A local US commander was quoted in the *Washington Post* article:

*"This is a story about heroes. It shows the tenacity of the Marines and their fierce loyalty to each other. They were absolutely unwilling to leave their brother Marines behind."*

The level of resistance experienced by the Marine supply convoy was far greater than expected and what then happened is highly significant. To quote the *Washington Post* again:

*"Just before dawn, Wednesday... AC-130 Spectre gun-ships launched a devastating punitive raid over a six-block area around where the convoy was attacked, firing dozens of artillery shells that shook the city and lit up the sky. Marine officials said the area was virtually destroyed and that no further insurgent activity has been seen there."*

The AC-130 is a development of the Lockheed C-130 Hercules which has side-mounted machine guns and a powerful 105mm howitzer. The plane circles a target area firing the weapons with considerable accuracy at a designated target area. The howitzer, in particular, has a devastating effect, capable of firing 200 high explosive shells in a matter of minutes. The attack on the Fallujah neighbourhood, several hours after the ambush, was the equivalent of destroying a small town and was, as the *Post* reported, a punitive raid. The human impact on that part of the city, especially on the families living there, was not reported.

This incident in Fallujah was one of the few that came to light at the time, another being an incident near the city of Baquba later in 2004. There, a US Army unit was engaged in a bitter fire-fight with insurgents, eventually overcoming opposition but only with great difficulty. The angered soldiers killed some insurgents and then strapped their bodies to the bonnets of the jeeps, like hunting trophies, and paraded them through the city, an embedded journalist reporting on the sullen crowd that witnessed this. To the soldiers this was an action that spoke of their deep frustration at this protracted opposition from men regarded as terrorists. For the local people it added further to their opposition to occupation.

The Fallujah and Baquba incidents are two of the few examples reported at the time but many more have since been identified, some of them in the documents just released. They confirm an overall picture of the sheer anger and bitterness experienced by so many American military units, faced with an insurgency that was entirely unexpected and for which they were largely untrained.

### **Responsibilities**

Seeking to understand the behaviour of the coalition forces - especially the troops on the ground - is in no way an attempt to justify it. Indeed many of the actions may well amount to war crimes. What it does try to do, though, is to put it in context. What happened in Fallujah and Baquba, and what was repeated many times across Iraq, was a consequence of the original decision to go to war. This, in turn, was a core part of the Bush administration's determination to extend the conflict against al-Qaida to a much wider conflict against an axis of evil.

This was a political decision taken by those at the core of the Bush administration and it is there that responsibility finally lies. The recent revelations confirm in some detail what was already widely suspected and lend further support to the case for a fundamental reappraisal of the entire war. More generally, and in relation to civilian casualties, they offer support for a movement within significant elements of international civil society that is beginning to attract attention. This is based on the argument that any party that embarks on a war should report in detail on the people it kills and injuries and on the circumstances of those actions. It may take years for such an apparently straightforward task to be widely accepted but, if it eventually is, then a much more accurate understanding of the true costs of war might become possible.

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