

Britain: Media report widespread hostility to US/UK forces in Iraq

By Julie Hyland
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Just days into the war against Iraq, it is clear that the US-led action, supported by British and Australian military forces, is provoking widespread, popular resistance.

Despite strenuous efforts to tightly monitor and censor coverage, US and British officials are having to admit they have been taken by surprise at the “stubborn resistance” their troops have encountered in virtually every city and town so far in the campaign and “higher than expected casualties”.

The resistance, and how to deal with it, is thought to be a factor in the hastily convened meeting between Prime Minister Tony Blair and President George W. Bush, set for Camp David later this week. Official sources have said only that the meeting is to discuss the war’s progress and its aftermath, but an unnamed US official confirmed that the “face to face” meeting had been organised at Blair’s request, stating, “I think Blair feels he needs this consultation.”

The media have largely concentrated on exchanges between Iraqi irregular forces and US and British troops. American forces came under sustained attack at Nasiriyah, a strategic crossing point over the Euphrates River, and were forced to withdraw from the border town of Umm Qasr on Monday March 24. Similarly, in Basra, Iraq’s second largest city, British forces have now designated the city’s capture as a “military objective”, following fierce resistance to their advance.

The scale of opposition already encountered has intensified disquiet as to what awaits US/UK forces when they finally reach Baghdad. During one 24-hour period alone, the US conducted 900 sorties—involving B52 bombers, other warplanes and surface-to-surface missiles—aimed at “softening” up the thousands of Iraqi troops said to be massed outside the capital to block the US/UK advance.

Several recent reports, however, underscore that opposition is not confined to Saddam Hussein’s special forces, nor simply motivated by fear of the regime. The US-led action is meeting genuine hostility from millions of

ordinary people, who consider the invaders to be just as great a threat, if not more so, than the Ba’athist regime.

Claims that the Iraqi people would “welcome” the US-led forces as “liberators”, have fallen flat, with American and British forces being forced to fight street by street in almost every town they have entered.

In Basra, for example, British officers are said to be considering calling in reinforcements to assist in the city’s takeover—a centre of the 1991 failed uprising against Saddam Hussein following the last Gulf war—after the Desert Rats were forced to withdraw due to the extent of resistance.

Captain Patrick Trueman expressed shock at the opposition. “It was expected that the Iraqi government wouldn’t concern itself too much with the fall of Basra because of the perceived hatred of Saddam among the local Shi’ite population.

“We always had the idea that everyone in this area hated Saddam. Clearly, there are a number who don’t”.

Sergeant Mark Smith indicated the breadth of resistance, when he told reporters, “It’s not the Iraqi army we have to worry about, it’s the person with the Kalashnikov in the back garden.

“The Iraqis are smiling assassins. They wave at you as you go past, then shoot you in the back”.

Significantly, Britain’s first combat death in Iraq (the first 16 fatalities were due to accidents or so-called “friendly fire”) was the outcome of civilian unrest.

Sgt. Steven Roberts, 33-years-old, was shot dead on Sunday March 23, whilst apparently “trying to calm rioting civilians near al-Zubayr”, the BBC reported. There is a news blackout on the riot and its causes, but within 24 hours another British soldier had been killed in the same area.

Nor has there been any signs of the mass surrender of Iraqi forces, and waves of refugees attempting to flee the country, that American and British officials had claimed would build to a flood within the first few hours of their offensive.

On the contrary, western diplomats in Damascus have reported that thousands of Iraqis, and other Arab nationals,

have crossed back to Iraq from Jordan and Syria to participate in fighting the Americans and British.

In Jordan, more than 5,000 Iraqi men had crossed the border overland into Iraq in the five days before the war started. A further 3,000 temporary passports have also been issued during the last three days to exiled Iraqis seeking to join the opposition, Iraq's consular office in Ammam reported.

And in Baghdad, news that a British pilot had been downed in the Tigris brought thousands onto the riverbank to participate in the search, many waving guns, cheering and firing into papyrus reeds.

Such scenes caused the *Financial Times* to admit that "soldiers are not being welcomed as liberators but often confronted with hatred."

Whatever the immediate outcome of the war, the long-term implications are enormous, its editorial of March 25 continued. Street fighting "may be just a short-term irritant. But longer term it may change Iraqi perceptions too, demonstrating how irregular warfare might be used against the Anglo-US occupation in the future. It is not clear, moreover, whether ordinary Iraqis are happy to be invaded, however much they hate Mr Hussein. It is even less certain how they will react to being occupied."

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper the same day, Dr Burhan M al-Chalabi, chairman of the British Iraqi Foundation, expressed astonishment that the British and US governments had ever believed their war would be a push over.

In order to win support for their unprecedented "unjust and illegal" military invasion, it had been necessary to claim that "this is not a colonial war of occupation but a war of liberation" that would be welcomed by the Iraqi people, Dr al-Chalabi wrote.

"It is now clear to everyone that ordinary Iraqis are resisting this military aggression with their lives and souls" to the surprise of everyone, except the Iraqi's themselves, he continued.

Such resistance is rooted in the Iraqi people's long history of struggle against colonial oppression, which the current offensive was reviving, he went on.

British imperialism had similarly claimed that its colonisation of Iraq in 1917, was aimed at "liberation through occupation". For the best part of the 20th century, the Iraqi people fought to get rid of its colonial oppressors and succeeded. Whilst superior technology "may eventually overwhelm the Iraqi army ... there is no doubt that in the end this military crusade against Iraq will fail just like the previous British occupation," he concluded.

Memories of previous colonial invasions are undoubtedly being reinforced by the behaviour of the troops themselves.

Journalists have reported that troops entering towns and neighbourhoods have torn down the Iraqi national flag, replacing it with the Stars and Stripes.

Filing a report for the *Guardian* newspaper from just outside Nasiriyah, war correspondent James Meek reported that British and American marines were responding "harshly" against civilians.

Marines are conducting "aggressive series of house searches and arrests", in the neighbouring areas, Meek's reported, citing the account of Said Yahir, a 50-year-old farmer and businessman. Stopped at one checkpoint Yahir—who had participated in the 1991 uprising against Hussein—demanded to know why US marines had come to his house, taken his son, his rifle and his three million dinars (about £500). "What did I do?" Yahir asked. "This is your freedom that you're talking about? This is my life savings."

Meek quoted Sergeant Michael Sprague, responding to questions on the killing of two Iraqi civilians the previous day. The two men had been carrying Kalashnikovs but had made no attempt to fire at the marines. "They were pointing their weapons in an aggressive manner, and they were taken out," Sprague replied.

In an especially troubling account, Meek also cited complaints that the US had begun deliberately targeting civilian areas in response to the opposition its troops were encountering. Mustafa Mohammed Ali, a surgical assistant at the Saddam hospital in Nasiriyah, reported that half an hour after two US marines were killed, American aircraft had dropped three or four cluster bombs on civilian areas, killing 10 and wounding 200.

"They started bombing Nasiriyah on Friday," Ali stated, "but they didn't bomb civilian areas until yesterday [Monday], when these American dead bodies were brought in."

"There's no room in the Saddam hospital because of the wounded. It's the only hospital in town. When I saw the dead Americans I cheered in my heart."

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