

Baghdad market massacre sheds ghastly light on nature of US invasion

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Wednesday's atrocity in a Baghdad working class neighborhood has cast a grisly light on the real character of the US-British invasion. The final death toll from two US missiles that tore apart the Abu Taleb Street market in the suburb of Al Shaab is expected to approach 30.

Notwithstanding the predictable claims by the Pentagon, uncritically regurgitated by the Western media, that the bombing was either an Iraqi military attack on its own people or a US "mistake," the civilian carnage is the direct and inevitable result of the war that the Bush administration has embarked upon.

As has been discussed in ruling circles in Washington and London for months, the subjugation of Iraq and the conquest of Baghdad—a sprawling city of 5 million people the size of Los Angeles or Toronto—will require the flattening of poor suburbs, the occupation of residential areas and the terrorizing of the population.

Two cruise missiles struck the heavily populated and impoverished Al Shaab area at midday, a time when Abu Taleb Street was at its busiest. Iraqi officials said 14 people were killed, but other reports said at least 20 people perished immediately, with 30 others injured, some badly.

It was the worst single reported instance of civilian deaths since the aerial assault by B-52 bombers, F-17 jet fighters and cruise missiles began a week earlier. The area that was hit was one of Baghdad's poorest—consisting of overcrowded apartments, rundown shops and cheap restaurants.

Associated Press Television News video showed a large crater in the street, a smoldering building, demolished cars, and bodies wrapped in plastic sheeting in the back of a pickup truck. Flames could be seen rising above the burning shops. Men with buckets doused the wreckage of blackened automobiles, while women grabbed the hands of children and ran from the scene.

The streets were flooded after water pipes ruptured. Streetlights toppled over, trees were uprooted and some cars were overturned. At least half of the 17 damaged cars were completely gutted by fire, with only charred metal skeletons left. Other cars had their wheels blown off by the force of the explosion, while flying shrapnel damaged nearby apartments.

Hundreds of people milled around on the street in front of the

gutted market. Some of them shook their fists in anger. "This is barbarian!" shouted Adnan Saleh Barseem. "It's proof that their aggression is collapsing."

Among the victims were 21 young people in a minibus. As dead and horribly burned survivors were brought into Al Kindi hospital, Tomma Hussein, a casualty ward doctor, said: "This enemy wants to kill all of us."

These comments reveal not only the deepening outrage of ordinary Iraqi people, but an understanding that the bombing is part of a new and deliberate pattern following the collapse of Pentagon predictions that the Iraqi regime would quickly surrender or disintegrate.

A number of Western correspondents recorded the carnage, and the hostility, in Al Shaab. Robert Fisk, writing in the British *Independent*, described the scene as "an outrage, an obscenity." He wrote: "The severed hand on the metal door, the swamp of blood and mud across the road, the human brains inside a garage, the incinerated, skeletal remains of an Iraqi mother and her three small children in their still-smouldering car..."

"Abu Hassan and Malek Hammoud were preparing lunch at the Nasser Restaurant on the north side of Abu Taleb St. The missile or bomb that killed them landed next to the westbound road, its blast tearing away the front of the cafe and cutting the two men—the first 48, the second only 18—to pieces. A fellow worker led me through the rubble. 'This is all that is left of them now,' he said, holding an oven pan dripping with blood.

"At least 15 cars burst into flames, burning many of their occupants to death. Several men tore desperately at the doors of another flame-shrouded car in the centre of the street which had been tipped upside down by the same missile. They were forced to watch helplessly as the woman and her three children inside were cremated alive in front of them. The second missile or bomb hit neatly on the eastbound road, sending shards of metal into three men standing outside a concrete apartment block."

Reporting for the Canadian *National Post*, Patrick Graham (the son of Canada's Foreign Minister Bill Graham), described local people finding hands and other body parts of victims strewn across the area and waving them in the air in furious protests. Graham called the results of the bombing "gruesome" and quoted a local resident's response:

“‘People inside the cars were melted,’ says Thamer Al Mutalib, his hands still covered in soot from pulling bodies from the wreckage... ‘It was to scare people and force them to give up,’ said Thamer... ‘This is terrorism. We’re not military people—we’re just shop owners’.”

British *Guardian* correspondent Suzanne Goldenberg reported that an oil tanker had parked in the area moments before the bombing. “Five cars were carbonized, and flames licked the first-floor windows of buildings.” A local man, Hisham Madloul, told her: “There were three families in the building upstairs and many children. We have committed no sin. We are not guilty. Why are they doing this? We are innocent people? What does Bush want?”

In his dispatch, Fisk noted that he had checked the neighborhood for military targets but found none. “Iraqis said there was a military encampment just over a kilometre from the street, though I couldn’t find it. Others talked about a firefighters’ headquarters, but that can hardly be described as a military target.”

Nonetheless, the US Central Command said in a statement that US aircraft used “precision-guided weapons” to target Iraqi missiles and launchers “placed within a civilian residential area” and that “most of the missiles were positioned less than 300 feet from homes.”

The Pentagon sought to blame Saddam Hussein’s government for the carnage, one way or another. “A full assessment of the operation is ongoing,” the statement said. “In some cases, such damage is unavoidable when the (Iraqi) regime places military weapons near civilian areas.”

Despite stating that the US had launched more than 600 Tomahawk missiles and 4,300 precision-guided weapons in six days, Major-General Stanley McChrystal told a Pentagon briefing that the Al Shaab bombs could have been Iraqi weapons.

Without offering details, Pentagon spokeswoman Torie Clarke said Iraq placed missile launchers only 100 meters from residents’ homes and this was “a sign of the brutality of this regime and how little they care about civilians.” Clarke insisted that US war strategists had gone to great lengths to craft precision strikes on military targets in order to keep casualties low. “Any casualty that occurs, any death that occurs, is a direct result of Saddam Hussein’s policies,” she said.

Almost without exception, the American and other Western media uncritically echoed this line, referring to the massacre as a “blunder” and condemning the Iraqi regime for allegedly embedding its military in civilian areas, supposedly using citizens as “human shields.”

This black propaganda is seeking to prepare the American and British public, and world opinion, for a terrible new phase in the war. Having last week destroyed most military and government buildings in Baghdad—all of which had been vacated long before—the Bush and Blair administrations are turning to civilian targets.

Two days before the Al Shaab tragedy, a cruise missile struck Baghdad’s Al A’azamiah district just as the call for the Muslim noon prayers blared from mosque minarets. The strike killed five people and injured 27, flattening one home and damaging two others.

On Tuesday night, hundreds of missiles rained down on residential areas, hitting television stations and a corner of the Al Rashid Hotel complex. Iraqi Satellite TV, which broadcasts 24 hours a day outside Iraq, went off the air for about eight hours. Iraq’s domestic state-run television service, which was not on the air at the time, resumed broadcasting Wednesday morning as scheduled.

It seems that the Bush administration has determined that it must silence the Iraqi media in order to stifle coverage of the intensifying bombing of Baghdad and other cities. International law makes it a war crime to target such facilities, because they are staffed by civilian media workers and technicians. But Jim Wilkinson, a spokesman for US Central Command, declared: “These targets are key regime command-and-control assets.”

The wider target is the Iraqi population, which has stunned the White House by fiercely resisting the US-British invasion force. The Al Shaab atrocity is an indication of what is already happening in Basra, Nasiriya, Karbala and other towns and villages where there are no reporters to witness the civilian death toll.

It is impossible to estimate the extent of the civilian casualties so far. For their own reasons, the Iraqi authorities appear to be understating the figure. On March 23, three days before the market bombing, the Iraqi government said 58 civilians had been killed and 469 injured throughout Iraq.

The Al Shaab massacre is a warning of what is to come once the ground assault on Baghdad begins. As the Pentagon planners have always anticipated, the Iraqi armed forces, augmented by local militias, have dug into positions throughout the metropolis. Boosted by the deep hatred for the occupying forces, the defense of the capital will be a largely guerrilla war, in which the army is mixed in with the population.

As the US political and military establishment found in Vietnam, a determined population defending its home territory and sovereignty can be defeated only by pulverizing entire residential areas and terrorizing the occupants into submission. President George W. Bush’s promise to wage a “relentless” war means attacking the very people he claims to be liberating, further intensifying the popular resistance.



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