

Descent into chaos:

US soldiers slaughter 10 Iraqi police in clash outside Fallujah

Peter Symonds
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As the level of attacks on US troops in Iraq and the number of casualties has continued to mount, the Pentagon has been attempting to recruit, train and deploy tens of thousands of Iraqi police in a desperate bid to shore up its control of the country and get American soldiers out of the firing line. But the killing of 10 Iraqi police by US soldiers outside the town of Fallujah last Friday reveals that the plan is rapidly unravelling amid the tensions created by growing popular opposition to the US occupation.

The deaths took place in the early hours of Friday morning. According to Iraqi officials, around 25 police officers in three vehicles were chasing a BMW after several gunmen opened fire on the governor's headquarters in Fallujah, 50km west of Baghdad. Outside the town the police came under fire from a US patrol and were forced off the road near a hospital built by Jordan after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

More than an hour later, eight Iraqi officers were dead and nine more were injured—with another two dying later of their wounds. The nearby hospital was severely damaged by American tank fire, one of its Jordanian security guards was dead and five others were wounded. According to eyewitnesses, in the midst of the chaotic situation the hospital guards had become involved in the shooting.

No formal investigation has taken place and the details are still unclear. But of all the versions, the least likely is that provided by American military spokesmen. They have asserted that US forces only opened fire after being shot at by “unknown forces” from one of the three police vehicles. The claim, which is the routine explanation given in all cases involving the killing of Iraqi civilians, is directly contradicted by the statements of surviving officers and other eyewitnesses.

Sergeant Assem Mohammed, who was wounded in the attack, told the *Washington Post* that the police had broken off the chase and turned around when they came under fire. Two of the three vehicles were white with blue markings that read “Iraqi Police, Fallujah”. The police were all members of the Fallujah Protection Force—a militia trained and equipped by US forces—and half were dressed in uniforms and wore distinctive arm bands with “FPF” in English.

The police tried to explain who they were but to no avail. “They kept firing, and we kept shouting at them, ‘We are police! We are police!’” Mohammed said. Another wounded officer, Arkan Adnan, said that officers had shouted in English “Police” and “We are officers”. He said that one policeman had pulled off his armband and waved it in the air but was shot.

Several accounts indicate that the police were not even returning fire. Arkan Adnan told the *New York Times* that none of the Iraqi police had fired their weapons. An Associated Press reporter who examined the scene said none of the spent shell casings were from the AK-47 rifles used by Iraqi police. All came from weapons used by US forces.

In the course of the frenzied attack, Dchia Mahmoud, a doctor at the Jordanian hospital, had approached the American force to request permission to evacuate the wounded but was refused. “I asked the Americans to let me in, and they said ‘No, you have to stop’,” Mahmoud said. He described the scene as horrific when he was allowed to approach, with bodies torn apart from large calibre weapons fired at close range.

Abdul Jalil, another of the wounded police, told the *New York Times* that the US force had been armed with at least two tanks which opened fire not only on the police but the hospital as well. “The attack severely damaged one of the hospital’s buildings, which had large holes and soot in its concrete façade,” the newspaper explained. Hundreds of spent cartridges, including from large calibre weapons and tanks, littered the ground where the US forces had been positioned, just 15 metres from the spot where the Iraqi police had huddled.

At the very least, the incident reveals a complete breakdown in cooperation between the US military and the Iraqi police. Facing a hostile population, US soldiers increasingly regard all Iraqis as enemies and react in knee-jerk fashion to any threat—real or imaginary—without bothering to take the most elementary precautions.

These tensions are particularly explosive in Fallujah. The international media regularly describes the town as a bastion of Baath party supporters—part of the so-called Sunni triangle—but real responsibility for the hostility rests with the heavy-handed repression meted out by American forces. In late April,

American troops opened fire on a crowd of protesters, killing at least 15 people and wounding many more. The US military claimed soldiers had fired in self-defence and, after sharply escalating tensions, paid a pittance in compensation to the families of the victims in an attempt to pacify opposition.

Following the killings last Friday, the Fallujah police force is on the point of open mutiny, threatening to end any cooperation with US forces and vowing revenge. Sergeant Khaled Abed Hammadi told the *Washington Post*: “If they kill one of ours, we’ll kill 10 of theirs. If they kill 10 of ours, we’ll kill 100 of theirs. We will not stand for it, we’ll not support them, we want nothing to do with them.” A black banner was strung above the one-story police headquarters building. It carried the names of the dead and was inscribed with the words “Fallujah Protection Force mourns the martyrdom of its members who have been killed at the hands of American forces”.

During the funerals for the dead officers on Saturday, crowds took to the streets chanting “America is the enemy of God” and “The blood of our martyrs will not go in vain”. One of the mourners, Taleb Hameed, a 30-year-old school teacher, told the press: “We want the Americans to leave our country because they have brought us only death. We are fed up with their apologies. We will continue our resistance.” Senior Sunni clerics issued a statement condemning the killings and called for a general strike on Sunday to coincide with the beginning of three days of mourning.

A belated statement of regret by the US military issued more than 36 hours after the massacre did nothing to stem the outrage. Spokesman Lieutenant Colonel George Krivo told reporters in Baghdad that he expressed “our deepest regrets” for the deaths and the damage to the hospital. He provided no account of the events, saying there would be an investigation, but insisted that US forces only responded after being fired upon.

Widespread anger at the massacre of Iraqi police has no doubt provided further fuel for the continuing guerrilla attacks on US troops in Fallujah. Two incidents have been reported over the last three days.

Last Friday a convoy of US Humvees came under attack from rocket propelled grenades after a bomb exploded underneath one of the vehicles. An eyewitness Haythem Saleh said that US troops poured onto the street and opened fire. “The Americans started to shoot randomly against the houses,” Saleh said. At least four bystanders were injured, including a young girl Usama Hamid who was playing in her house. She later died in hospital, compounding the anger of residents.

On Sunday an American soldier was killed and another three were wounded in an attack outside Fallujah. The death brings to 155 the number of US troops who have died in Iraq since President Bush announced the end of major combat on May 1.

As for the Iraqi police, they find themselves in an untenable situation, despised as collaborators by their fellow citizens and distrusted by their paymasters. Many are young and ill-trained.

The remainder were members of the hated security forces of the Hussein dictatorship—another source of distrust and hostility.

Their position was highlighted in an article in the *Washington Post* which followed up an attack last week on a convoy of US military engineers in the town of Khaldiyah near Fallujah. During the fighting, which lasted over an hour, a small crowd gathered to cheer on the guerrillas with shouts of “Oh Iraq we sacrifice our lives and blood for you.” The US troops suffered no casualties but they left behind at least three destroyed vehicles—a transporter, a five-tonne truck and at least one Humvee.

A *Washington Post* reporter who went to the town found the US-trained police force besieged, demoralised and widely despised. The police complained to the newspaper that they were openly insulted as collaborators, lackeys and spies, on the occasions that they ventured outside the police station. “The people tell us we’re selling our country for dollars,” Thaer Abdullah Saleh said. “Even our families call us collaborators.”

At the scene of the Khaldiyah ambush, a number of young men had blocked the road with parts of the burnt out US trucks. They were stopping vehicles and forcing the drivers to kiss the Iraqi flag as a sign of their allegiance. At a nearby barber’s shop, the barber Hakim Talib and his customers warned the police against interfering. “If the policemen work with the Americans, we consider them enemies,” Talib said. The police officers indicated that they had taken the message to heart.

The Khaldiyah police are ill-equipped and ill-trained. Their station has no phone. The police chief’s pickup is nothing but a charred frame after it was torched during the earlier clash with protesters at the mayor’s office. And like their counterparts in Fallujah, some were expressing open rebellion. Dhiaa Din Rajoub declared his sympathy for the resistance, saying: “It’s our right. This is our country, this is an occupation, and we don’t accept it.”

Far from the Iraqi police providing a solution to the deepening crisis of the US occupation, it appears just as likely that they will join the armed opposition against it.



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