US troops slaughter three more Iraqis

Peter Symonds
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In the early hours of Tuesday morning, the tragic deaths of three more Iraqis were added to the civilian toll that Washington rarely even acknowledges. A patrol of US soldiers surrounded a farmhouse in the small village of Al Saja near the town of Fallujah and a short time later called in air support. The Iraqis died after missiles slammed into the building and surrounding area.

US military authorities have treated the incident dismissively. Spokeswoman Specialist Nicole Thompson claimed that "unknown forces" had fired on troops from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division at around 2 a.m., and then fled to the village. She confirmed "at least one enemy dead" as a result of the US attack but could provide no information about other casualties.

Specialist Anthony Reinoso, another military spokesman, repeated the same account, adding his own embellishments. According to him, as the soldiers approached the village "a crowd had formed," "weapons were seen" and "the crowd attempted to block several intersections." A clash followed that involved "a coalition aircraft" and left "one enemy killed."

Reinoso did not explain why US soldiers had been patrolling in the dead of night or how he knew that the dead man was an "enemy". Nor could he offer any reason why the US military had responded by calling for a massive air strike. In all likelihood, he had no idea. Like the rest of the story, he was simply making it up as he went along.

Neither account bears any relationship to what reporters found when they went to the scene, spoke to villagers and visited survivors of the attack in nearby hospitals. Three men died when the missile slammed into the house in which they were sleeping: Ali Jumaili, 45, and two of his cousins, Saadi Fayad Jumaili and Salem Ismail Jumaili, both in their mid-30s.

Some 15 or so family members had been sleeping in the four-room building. Two of Ali's sons—Hussein, 12, and Tahsin, 9—were injured along with Abed Rasheed, 50, who had been sleeping on the roof but ran downstairs as the missile attack began. The Canadian *Globe and Mail* described the devastation: six large craters; walls and doors riddled with shrapnel; shattered windows and blood-stained floors.

The *New York Times* report, which names Ali as Ali Khalaf Muhammad, concluded: "From a preliminary examination of the scene, it was obvious that a major attack had occurred. Bomb or missile craters dotted the yard of the house, and family members pointed to two places where ordnance had landed but failed to detonate. Bullet holes puncture steel doors and shattered windows, as well as a picture of Mr Muhammad that hung in the corner of the room where he died."

All the evidence pointed to a completely one-sided attack. "Family members insisted they had offered no resistance to the American patrol. No bullet cartridges or weapons were visible this afternoon [Tuesday] at their house, only bomb craters and holes punched in concrete by large-calibre weapons," the newspaper stated.

Ali's brother, Zaidan, told the press: "We don't understand why they would kill us here... We are only peasants here. American soldiers came here in the morning and searched our house, but they found nothing. We didn't shoot at them. With what? With our cows? We are peasants and farmers."

Zaidan said he had seen US troops patrolling near the village on Monday evening but thought nothing of it. He awoke to the sound of shooting around 2 a.m. Some 15 minutes later he heard warplanes approaching and the house erupted in explosions. "The attack came very quickly. There was heavy bombardment and we couldn't hide from it. The air was filled with splinters," he said.

The family and neighbours had tried to take the wounded to hospital but US troops had closed off the road and refused to let them pass for an hour. According to Zaidan, a US officer had appeared in the village the following morning and, speaking through an interpreter, admitted that a mistake had been made and offered an apology. Neither of the military spokespersons—Thompson or Reinoso—would confirm that any apology had been made to the devastated family.

Ali's cousin, Ghanem Jumaili, gave voice to the anger felt in the village. Speaking outside the funeral tent where nearly 100 people were mourning the dead men, he told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "How can the Americans come here shooting us like we're Ali Babas [bandits]? Don't they know these men are fathers and brothers? They kill us in our own homes! They shoot us from our bicycles! They come as terrorists and thieves.

"Is this the liberation of Iraq," he exclaimed. "As long as [US troops] act like this, there will be no stability in Iraq. Every person martyred here today is worth 100 Americans. Let me make this clear: The real war has not started yet. It starts from this day on."

Details of the incident remain unclear and will remain so if the US military has its way. No formal investigation has been

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announced. But from what is known, it is unlikely that any "crowd" formed in the village or that any shots were fired at the troops from the farmhouse. Moreover, if one of the three dead men was an "enemy," the military has certainly not provided any proof. Neither has it justified unleashing a massive airstrike against defenceless civilians.

What the episode does suggest is that in response to growing resistance, particularly in areas like Fallujah, which forms part of the so-called Sunni Triangle, the Pentagon is stepping up its policy of repression and terrorism: rounding up or killing anyone suspected of being an enemy and responding to any sign of opposition with massive firepower, regardless of the consequences for the civilian population.

Writing in the *Independent* on September 20, journalist Robert Fisk drew a related conclusion following his failed attempts to get answers from US authorities about the killing of an Iraqi interpreter last week. The death only came to light because the interpreter, Saad Mohamed Sultan, worked for Italian diplomat Pietro Cardone, who, with his wife, was travelling in the same car at the time. The driver attempted to overtake a US convoy; a US soldier motioned to him not to and, as the car was pulling back, fired a single bullet that killed Saad. The convoy did not even bother to stop.

Fisk commented: "An increasing number of journalists in Baghdad now suspect that US proconsul Paul Bremer and his hundreds of assistants ensconced in the heavily guarded former presidential palace, have lost touch with reality. Although an inquiry was promised into the shooting of the Iraqi interpreter, details of the incident suggest that US troops now have carte blanche to open fire at Iraqi civilian cars on the mere suspicion that their occupants may be hostile."

An article in the *Asian Times* entitled "The Mean Streets of Baghdad" on September 23 recounted the fate of a 23-year-old Jordanian student. He was detained at gunpoint on Saturday and held for hours after doing nothing more than back-chatting a US soldier who rudely ordered him about. He found himself in a big hall in the airport along with 400 others. Ahmad was released, but many others remain detained for days or weeks inside Camp Cropper—the US prison set up within the airport grounds.

The *Asian Times* commented: "US repression is relentless. Red Cross officials confirm that more than 20,000 people have been arrested in Baghdad in the past few months. Most come and go—but there's no way to keep tabs on all the cases: there are no functioning courts and judges. Amnesty International has already denounced cases of 'torture,' and an unknown number of Iraqi civilians have been gunned down by US search patrols. The bunker-down Coalition Provisional Authority simply refuses to mention how many Iraqi civilians are being shot or killed every day—either victims of crime or victims of US repression."

These media accounts provide only a glimpse of the methods that the US military is employing to terrorise the Iraqi population. Increasingly the US occupation authority is not prepared to tolerate any open reporting or criticism of its activities. Indeed, there is a growing list of incidents in which journalists themselves are being shot at or arbitrarily detained.

The latest case involved the arrest of an Associated Press reporter and his driver on Tuesday. Both were handcuffed, forced to stand in the sun for three hours and denied water or the use of a phone. They were detained by soldiers of the 1st Armoured Division near Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad, and accused of participating in the insurgency against US troops, despite their repeated attempts to explain they were journalists. They were later taken to a US base where they were released after a curt apology.

The same day Washington's puppet Iraqi Governing Council issued a statement limiting the activities of the Arabic satellite channels, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, both of which have been critical of the US occupation of Iraq. The council accused the channels of "encouraging terrorism" and "endangering stability and democracy" and banned them from official press conferences and government ministries. An Al Jazeera spokesman denounced the decision, saying: "Its victims are the truth... and freedom of the press."

Both Washington and its Iraqi flunkeys have a vested interest in ensuring the truth does not come out. While the Pentagon refuses to maintain a list of Iraqi civilian casualties, the tally of deaths and injuries posted on the website *Iraq Body Count* (http://www.iraqbodycount.net/bodycount.htm) indicates that it is extensive. Their figures are based on the gathering and crosschecking of media reports and therefore represent only a fraction of the actual casualties. As of early September, their estimated toll was between 7,346 and 9,146 Iraqi civilian deaths since the US invasion began.

The terrible events at the village of Al Saja on Tuesday have just added three more.

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