

# US military metes out collective punishment to Iraqi city

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Despite the attempts of the Bush administration and international media to claim the capture of Saddam Hussein as a major breakthrough in suppressing armed resistance, events on the ground in Iraq speak otherwise. As the attacks on US troops and Iraqi collaborators continue unabated, the response of the US military has been to intensify its heavy-handed repression aimed at terrorising the Iraqi people into submission.

Just days after Hussein's detention, some 2,500 US soldiers sealed off Samarra, a city of 200,000 people, in the early hours of December 17 and set about smashing their way into homes and factories in search of "insurgents". It was a classic reprisal raid, not unlike those carried out by Israeli troops against the Palestinian population, or for that matter by the Nazis against villages and towns accused of harbouring resistance fighters in occupied Europe.

The Pentagon identified Samarra as a "hotspot" after two separate US convoys were ambushed simultaneously on November 30. American troops responded and claimed to have scored "a significant victory" by killing 54 of the attackers. However, journalists who later questioned hospital staff and local residents, found an entirely different story: that US soldiers had fired indiscriminately, killing nine civilians including a child and an elderly Iranian pilgrim, and wounding others.

On December 15, US troops were ambushed again. Military spokesmen claimed that 11 "insurgents" had been killed, but like the earlier clash, failed to produce any evidence. According to veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk, the only dead man to be found was a vegetable seller. The following day, American soldiers raided a nearby village and detained more than 70 people, including an alleged rebel commander Qais Hatten.

December 17's huge operation, however, was clearly planned well in advance. US military planners decided the city had to be taught a lesson. Or as Lieutenant Colonel

Nate Sassaman told the media afterward: "Samarra has been a little bit of a thorn in our side. It hasn't come along as quickly as other cities in the rebuilding of Iraq. This operation is designed to bring them up to speed."

Operation Ivy Blizzard began at 2 a.m. Troops from the Army's 4th Infantry Division, backed by Apache attack helicopters and F-16 fighters, blocked the main routes and poured into the city. "Using sledgehammers, crowbars, explosives and armoured vehicles, US forces smashed down the gates of homes and the doors of workshops and junkyards to attack the Iraqi resistance that has persisted despite the capture of Saddam Hussein," Associated Press reported.

According to other accounts, US troops detonated plastic explosives to break open doors. In one of the city's industrial areas, the military used Bradley Fighting Vehicles to ram through the doors of warehouses and workshops. US military officials cited by the *Los Angeles Times* described the operation as a "robust response" to insurgents in Samarra. Others explained that a force of some 1,500 fighters was conducting attacks on US troops as well as police and civilians working for the US occupation authorities.

In a sinister development, hooded men described as "Iraqi civil corpsmen" accompanied the US troops. One of them told the *Los Angeles Times*: "This is a tribal town, and everyone knows everyone else. If someone knows who I am, they will surely try to kill me as a collaborator. The resistance is everywhere here." While he did not explain his role in the operation, the obvious function of such Iraqi militia is to finger and interrogate suspected "insurgents".

The US soldiers had been primed for the task. Staff Sergeant Tome Walker told the press: "They hyped this place like it was the Wild West. We heard there were two factions of foreign fighters, and Fedayeen Saddam [Hussein's paramilitary forces]. We haven't seen it yet.

Maybe later in the week.” By the end of the day, 86 people had been detained, just 12 of whom were on the US list of targets, and a cache containing 200 automatic rifles and some bomb-making material had been uncovered.

According to the US military, several civilians were wounded but no one was killed. But as on previous occasions, this bland statement proved to be a mixture of lies and callous indifference to the suffering, not to speak of the anger and resentment, which had been caused. A dispatch by Robert Fisk entitled “Shooting Samarra’s schoolboys in the back” reported at least one fatality—a taxi driver Amer Baghdadi who was shot dead by US troops. Other casualties were in the Samarra hospital.

Maouloud Hussein, 31, was shot in the back as he tried to shepherd his family into the back room of their house. His brother Hamid Hussein angrily declared: “You said you would bring us freedom and democracy but what are we supposed to think? My neighbour, the Americans took him in front of his wife and two children and tied his hands behind his back, and then, a few hours later, after all this humiliation, they came and told his wife to take all her most expensive things and they put explosives in their house and blew it up. He is a farmer. He is innocent. What have we done to deserve this?”

Issam Naim Hamid, 17, was in the emergency ward with a bullet wound to his stomach. His mother, Manal, explained that US troops had come to their home at around 3 a.m. and fired through the gate. As the family huddled for protection, one of the bullets hit Issam and another hit his father who was in a serious condition in Tikrit hospital. Manal was terrified that they would bleed to death as the US troops refused to allow anyone to leave the house for several hours.

In a separate interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Manal, a teacher, denounced the heavy-handed methods of the US military. “The best thing America can do for us is go home and let us take care of our own security. This will only make the resistance stronger... How can the Americans treat us this way? Where is the democracy they promised us?” she asked.

Asked to comment on the impact of the operation on civilians, Colonel Frederick Rudesheim, commander of one of the 4th Infantry Division’s combat teams, was completely unapologetic. “Certainly we’ve inconvenienced a number of citizens of Samarra. But these same citizens are the ones who’ve been living for months with terrorists among them,” he said.

Rudesheim’s comments reveal the logic behind

Operation Ivy Blizzard. It is not only the resistance groups that are being blamed for the attacks on US troops. All of the city’s residents, “who’ve been living for months with terrorists,” are being held responsible. The response was a form of collective punishment, aimed at intimidating and terrorising the city as a whole. The US military is increasingly resorting to such methods to pacify a population that is becoming more and more hostile to the neo-colonial occupation of the country.

It is significant that the US military has singled out Samarra for special attention. Prior to the US invasion, the city and its tribal leaders were regarded as anti-Hussein—traditionally it had been a rival to Hussein’s hometown of Tikrit. As Ali Hussein, 35-year-old labourer, exclaimed to the press: “Saddam accused us of being against him, and now the Americans accuse us of being with Saddam.” If Samarra has now become a “hotbed”, it is one more indication of the extent of the opposition to the US occupation.

The US military claims that there has been a significant decline in the level of attacks in Samarra. The city has been placed under an 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. curfew. The arrests have continued. Any lull, however, is dependent on the presence of large numbers of US troops and is therefore only temporary. One “insurgent” told the *Washington Post*: “There is a total siege of the city. They are all over the streets. If we hit them, people are bound to get hurt. If one shot is fired, the whole street will be shot up.”

Elsewhere, the anti-US attacks and American reprisals continue unabated. Over the weekend, guerrillas struck oil storage tanks in southern Baghdad, blew up a pipeline in the al-Mashahda area north of the capital and fired a rocket-propelled grenade on a US military convoy in Mosul. The US military continued its raids and house-to-house searches in Fallujah and Rawah, as well as Samarra.



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