

US military strafes Iraqi wedding party, killing at least 40

Peter Symonds
21 May 2004

In another example of callous indifference for Iraqi lives, the US military strafed the small village of Mukaradeeb in the early hours of Wednesday morning, killing at least 40 men, women and children who were part of a local wedding party. Official US denials, which eyewitnesses and local officials have rejected as fabrications, have further fuelled anti-American anger in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

The US attack, which involved Special Forces troops backed by helicopter gunships and warplanes, took place at around 2.45am. The hamlet is a collection of less than a dozen houses in a remote area of western Iraq just 10 kilometres from the Syrian border. Iraqi eyewitnesses confirm the fact that a wedding had been underway, with a band hired from Baghdad providing the music.

An article in the *Scotsman* reported: “People who said they were guests said the wedding party was in full swing—with dinner just finished and the band playing tribal Arab music—when US fighters roared overhead and US vehicles started shining their highbeams. Worried, the hosts ended the party, men stayed in the wedding tent and women and children went into the house nearby, the witnesses said. About five hours later, the first shell hit the tent. Panicked, women and children ran out of the house, they said.”

The village was devastated. In television footage shown on the Al Arabiya channel, one eyewitness described the scene: “We were in Mukaradeeb. At 3am they rained the air with bombs. One after another the bombs were falling. Three houses with the guests were hit. They fired as if there were an armoured brigade inside, not a wedding party.”

One of the guests, Madhi Nawaf, a shepherd, explained in the *Scotsman* article that his daughter and her children were among the dead. “Mothers died with

their children in their arms. One of them was my daughter. I found her a few steps from the house, her two-year-old son Raad in her arm. Her one-year-old son, Ra’ed, was lying nearby, his head missing. Where were the foreign fighters they claim were hiding there? Everything they said is a lie.”

Among the dead were members of the band, including a popular singer, Hussein Ali. Basim Shehab, an organ player, was at the funeral for the band members in Baghdad yesterday. He said he had been sleeping in one of the tents when the bombing began. The attack “was like Hell,” he said. “Everything was on fire.”

US military spokesmen have insisted that there were no children among the casualties. However, Lieutenant Colonel Ziyad al-Jbouri, deputy police chief for Ramadi, told Associated Press (AP) that the dead numbered between 42 and 45, and included 15 children and 10 women. Dr Salah al-Ani, who works at the hospital in Ramadi, put the death toll at 45.

An AP report explained: “Associated Press Television News footage from the area near the Syrian border showed a truck containing bloodied bodies, many wrapped in blankets, piled one atop the other. Several were children, one of whom was decapitated. The body of a girl who appeared to be less than five years of age lay in a white sheet, her legs riddled with wounds and her dress soaked in blood.”

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, US military spokesmen continue to deny that US forces hit a wedding party. Brigadier General Mark Klimmitt claimed that the target had been “a suspected foreign fighter safe house” and that US troops were fired upon first. The only evidence offered by the Pentagon is that troops found a quantity of small arms, Iraqi and Syrian money, foreign passports and a satcom radio.

Even taken on face value, the American version of events confirms a reckless lack of concern for Iraqi civilians in launching an indiscriminate air assault in the middle of the night on what was “suspected” to be a safe house. It is far more likely, however, that the US statements amount to nothing more than another crude concoction of lies. US ground forces have not produced the bodies of any “foreign fighters”. None of the objects seized in the village prove the dead were fighters. At most, they indicate that villagers may have been involved in petty smuggling—a practice that is rife in the border area.

There are conflicting press reports over whether the wedding party engaged in the common custom of shooting off weapons in celebration. In an article in the British-based *Independent*, Sheikh Nasrallah Miklif, head of the Bani Fahd tribe, of which most of the dead were members, vigorously denied that there had been any firing. While he was not in the village at the time, he had spoken extensively to the survivors. He said the air strikes had begun without warning and were followed up by US troops who arrived in armoured vehicles.

“If they killed foreign fighters, why don’t they show us the bodies? If they suspected foreign fighters were here, why didn’t they come to arrest them, instead of using this huge force?” Sheikh Mikfil asked angrily.

The arrogance and contempt of the US military toward ordinary Iraqis was summed up in the remarks of Major General James Mattis, commander of the US 1st Marine Division, whose troops were involved in the attack. “Ten miles from the Syrian border and 80 miles from [the] nearest city and a wedding party? Don’t be naïve. Plus they had 30 males of military age with them,” he said.

The comments unwittingly reveal more than Mattis perhaps intended: that any gathering of Iraqis, particularly if it involves men of military age, is considered suspect and thus a legitimate target for the overwhelming use of force. He provided no explanation of the TV footage of dead women and children, declaring dismissively: “I have not seen the pictures but bad things happen in wars. I don’t have to apologise for the conduct of my men.”

The US military claims that it was seeking to prevent the infiltration of arms and “foreign fighters” into Iraq. All the evidence, however, points to the fact that the

vast majority of fighters joining the armed resistance against the US occupation are young Iraqis who have widespread local support. Apart from terrorising the Iraqi population, the purpose of such military operations may be connected to current US efforts to pressurise and menace the Syrian government. Just last week, Washington imposed a battery of new punitive measures on Syria.

In the wake of an outpouring of anger in Iraq and the Middle East over the latest atrocity, General Klimmitt announced an inquiry. “Because of the interest shown by the media, we’re going to have an investigation. Some of the allegations that have been made would cause us to go back and look at this,” he said. In other words, the real concern of the US military is the publicity, not the deaths of the Iraqi men, women and children. If there had been no reaction, the Pentagon simply would have buried the matter.

The worthlessness of such an inquiry is highlighted by a similar incident in Afghanistan in July 2002 when US gunships strafed a wedding party in the Afghan village of Kakarak, leaving 48 people dead, mainly women and children, and more than 100 injured. After a two-month investigation, the US Central Command issued an “unclassified executive summary” that ignored all the Afghan eyewitness accounts, answered none of the obvious questions, provided no evidence for its assertions and completely exonerated the US military.



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