

More Pentagon lies about the bombing of an Iraqi wedding party

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It took the publication of pictures showing US soldiers humiliating and abusing Iraqi prisoners before the Pentagon finally admitted that torture had taken place, even as it falsely claimed that only a few isolated individuals were involved. So it is not surprising that for more for a week, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, the US military has stonewalled and lied about a raid that killed more than 40 Iraqi men, women and children attending a wedding celebration in the village of Mukaradieb, near the Syrian border, in the early hours of May 19.

US military spokesmen have repeatedly denied that the US bombed a wedding party. Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt told the press last Saturday: "There was no evidence of a wedding: no decorations, no musical instruments found, no large quantities of food or leftover servings one would expect from a wedding celebration, no gifts." There was no wedding tent. He produced photographs of rifles, machine guns, foreign passports, bedding and other items and claimed that the lack of identification on the dead demonstrated that "a high-risk meeting of high-level anti-coalition forces" had been underway.

Kimmitt acknowledged that six women might have been killed but denied that any children had been among the dead. He conceded that there were "inconsistencies" but brushed off video footage and eyewitness statements that were already available, declaring: "There may have been some kind of celebration. Bad people have celebrations, too." But he continued to insist that all the evidence pointed to "a meeting in the middle of the desert by some people that were conducting either criminal or terrorist activities."

The following day, however, Associated Press Television News (APTN) obtained a copy of a videotape of the wedding celebrations filmed by cameraman Yasser Shawat Abdullah who was hired to record the event. An

Associated Press (AP) report on Monday explained that it "shows a dozen white pickup trucks speeding through the desert, escorting a bridal car decorated with colourful ribbons. The bride wears a Western-style white bridal dress and veil. The camera captures her stepping out of the car but does not show a close-up."

The video, which runs for several hours, recorded scenes of singing and dancing in an all-male tent set up in the garden of the host, Rikad Nayef. A well-known Iraqi singer Hussein al-Ali and his band had been hired to provide the music. Al-Ali and a number of band members were killed in the US attack, which also claimed the life of the cameraman. APTN obtained the tape from a cousin of the groom.

The footage does not show the actual US raid. According to various witnesses, the wedding took place over several days and at the time of the attack—around 2.45am—most people were asleep. The authenticity of the tape is confirmed by a number of details. An AP reporter and photographer were able to identify some of those on the wedding video as being among the dozen or so survivors interviewed on the day after the bombing.

In addition, an APTN crew visited the devastated site on May 20 and shot video showing "fragments of musical instruments, pots and pans and brightly coloured beddings used for celebrations, scattered around the bombed out tent". A water tanker truck can be seen in both the APTN footage and the wedding video, indicating that it is the same location.

The wedding video also clearly recorded one of the musicians—"a stocky man with close-cropped hair playing an electric organ". A video of the funerals for the dead in Ramadi, also obtained by APTN, showed the same man in the same shirt in a burial shroud. The footage also showed children being buried. According to the local Iraqi officials in Ramadi, at least 42 people were killed in the attack, including 15 children and 10 women.

Others have also visited the site and spoken to survivors.

A *New York Times* report on May 22 described the scene as follows: “The tent was blown apart, with sleeping mats scattered and a public address system flopped on its side. A pickup truck was riddled with bullets.... People interviewed in the village, Mukaradeeb, near the Syrian border, on Friday were adamant that American troops—in attacks from the air and the ground—fired on innocent people sleeping after a wedding.”

“It was a very normal wedding,” one of the guests, Ismael Hamad, 23, told the *New York Times* reporter. Asked about the attack, he said: “I am wondering why.”

After visiting the site, Eman Ahmed Khammas, director of the Baghdad office of International Occupation Watch, told the *New Standard*: “I saw it with my own eyes. It is only a sheep ranch and there were no fighters there, nor any evidence of weapons.”

According to the article: “Khammas described a horrendous scene of bullet-riddled musical instruments from the 13 band members killed in the assault, blood and pieces of flesh drying in the sand, and mourning neighbours and family members of slain wedding celebrants.”

Khammas said: “Iraqis everywhere are saddened by what happened here. But they are even more enraged at the lying of the American military and their complete disrespect towards the Iraqi people.”

What can one conclude from the evidence so far?

The US military is simply lying when it continues to deny that the guests at an Iraqi wedding party were hit with massive firepower from the air and ground. Survivors, Iraqi officials, videotapes and physical evidence at the site all attest to the fact that men, women and children who had taken part in the festivities were indiscriminately slaughtered in the middle of the night.

The Pentagon has provided no evidence to support its claim that a meeting of “high-level anti-coalition forces” was taking place in the village. As in the case of similar atrocities in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon has refused to divulge any of the “intelligence” on which the raid was based. None of the dead has been identified as being known members of any anti-US resistance group.

All that has been displayed by Kimmitt are photographs of the scene and an assortment of items purportedly seized during the raid. There are a variety of explanations, including quite innocent ones, for all the articles presented—including the weapons, passports and foreign

money. It is not uncommon for Iraqi tribesmen to have weapons, including quite sophisticated ones. Particularly after the fall of the Hussein regime, the country is awash with arms of different types.

Could the villagers, including the family staging the wedding, have been engaged in “criminal activities”? It is certainly possible. The area in the remote western desert near the Syrian border is notorious for smuggling—of sheep in particular. Last June the US military destroyed a convoy of vehicles in the same area claiming that it contained high-level Baathist officials escaping to Syria. Journalists who examined the wreckage found the remains of a pickup truck, a large transport truck and a water tanker, which were “typical of those used for smuggling sheep” into Syria, where the price is far higher.

It is also possible that many of the villagers were hostile, quite legitimately, to the illegal US-led occupation of their country. Some may have been involved in the armed resistance. Recent opinion polls in Iraq indicate that over 90 percent of the population is opposed to the continued US presence. Armed attacks on US and allied troops, as well as on their Iraqi collaborators, are taking place on a daily basis.

But neither Kimmitt nor any other US military spokesman has provided a shred of evidence that any of those targeted were involved in “either criminal or terrorist activities”. Nor, in the dead of night, was it possible to know with any degree of certainty who exactly was present. US soldiers claim that they were fired on—something that is disputed by all Iraqi survivors and eyewitnesses—and then called in air strikes to rain bombs, shells and missiles on the victims.

The Pentagon’s dismissive response to the atrocity makes clear that what took place at Mukaradeeb on May 19 is standard operating procedure for the US military. Based on flimsy “intelligence” extracted from torture victims and venal informers, US forces act as judge, jury and executioner in targeting homes and individuals with wanton disregard for the tragic consequences. The main aim of such methods is to terrorise and intimidate a population that is overwhelmingly hostile to the neo-colonial occupation of Iraq.



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