

Iraqi legislators denounce US assault on assembly member

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An incident on Tuesday graphically illustrated the real relationship that exists between the US military forces in Iraq and the newly-elected, so-called “sovereign” Iraqi national assembly. At a vehicle checkpoint controlling the entrance to the “Green Zone” compound where the assembly’s building is located, a US army private threw an assembly member’s identity card in his face, pulled him from his car, handcuffed him and dragged him away in front of stunned onlookers.

The assaulted MP, Fatah al-Shaik, was sporting a picture of anti-occupation Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in his vehicle. For that, member of the US-sponsored parliament or not, an American soldier had no hesitation in treating him just as US soldiers deal with other Iraqis every day.

For the MPs, the majority of whom have felt no urge to rise to their feet over the US-dictated curfews, roadblocks and raids that dominate the lives of ordinary Iraqis, having one of their own treated in this fashion was too much. The incident made far too obvious who really rules in Baghdad. As far as the US administration and military are concerned, the assembly members are a collection of puppets and sycophants whose role is to do what they are told and bestow a veneer of local legitimacy on decisions made in Washington.

For close to two hours, the national assembly, which was broadcast live across Iraq, was given over to a discussion on the assault. A resolution was adopted unanimously, demanding an official apology and the prosecution of the offending soldier.

In a teary-eyed speech, al-Shaik, a member of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the predominantly Shiite coalition that holds 140 of the 275 seats, recounted what had taken place:

“While I was on my way this morning to the national assembly, US forces surprised me by kicking my car several times... while my car was among 15 other cars waiting to be admitted into the Green Zone. One US soldier appeared to be designated to my car in particular, as it carried the picture of Shia leader Moqtada al-Sadr.

“As though he was antagonised by the picture, the US

soldier began to utter some words in English which I did not understand. When I took out my MP badge and showed it to him, he threw it in my face, opened the car door and pulled me out. When I told the translator with the soldier that I was a member of the national assembly, he answered, ‘To hell with you and the national assembly’.

“The soldier twisted my hands to the back in an effort to handcuff me. The soldier began to beat me and put his arm firmly around my neck. Then they pulled me off to a nearby room 10 metres away...”

“What happened to me represents an insult to the whole national assembly that was elected by the Iraqi people. This shows that the democracy we are enjoying is fake. Through such incidents, the US Army tries to show that it is the real controlling power in the country, not the new Iraqi government,” Shaik declared.

The incident took place in front of at least three other assembly members, none of whom contradicted the accusations made by Shaik in the Iraqi parliament. Ali Yushuaa, a Shiite legislator, told the session: “I saw the whole thing and adding insult to injury was when Iraqi soldiers aimed their rifles at brother Fatah as he was being mistreated by the Americans.”

During the assembly session, representatives of the main parties and factions that have collaborated with the US occupation rose one after the other to demagogically condemn the actions of the American military.

A member of the Kurdish Alliance, Abd al-Khalil Zanganah, stated: “According to the Geneva Conventions, an occupying force must respect the occupied nation. The offending soldier must be thrown out of our country.” A Sunni legislator called for American troops be “put on notice and given two months—no more—to leave the Green Zone”.

Falah Shnaishel of the UIA declared: “Is this the democracy we’ve been hoping for? Is this the sovereignty that we talk to the masses about?”

Even the US-educated speaker, Hachim al-Hassani, one of the most openly pro-American figures in Iraq, denounced the incident. He threatened to suspend sittings of the parliament

until it was moved to a new building away from the centre of the Green Zone and protected only by Iraqi troops. “Enough is enough. We reject any sign of disrespect directed at lawmakers.”

The heat on Tuesday reflects the fact that the US actions are making it impossible for the Iraqi politicians to portray the assembly, or the government it is about to form, as having any real authority or independence. A member of parliament being manhandled on the street reinforces in the eyes of the Iraqi people that, far from bringing democracy, the US invasion has turned their country into a de-facto American colony. Few take the claims that they have a “sovereign” parliament seriously. The 150,000 foreign troops in the country have complete immunity from Iraqi law, while the Iraqi armed forces operate under American command.

The resolution passed by the assembly also points to the growing disillusionment among the Iraqi parties and factions that have collaborated with the US occupation.

Two years on from the invasion, the émigré businessmen, Kurdish nationalists and Shiite fundamentalists who thought they could exploit the 2003 invasion for their own interests are being forced to confront a bitter truth: the Bush administration’s agenda is concerned solely with the strategic ambitions of US imperialism and the corporate interests of a select group of transnational firms such as KBR and Bechtel. As for the Iraqi factions, the Bush administration has simply played them off against one another, while forcing them to back away from any demands that conflict with US interests.

The Kurdish nationalists are being denied control over the northern oilfields and the city of Kirkuk, while to appease Turkey and other states with large Kurdish minorities, the US has pressured the Kurdish parties to all but renounce the perspective of an independent state. The Shiite parties are being denied an Islamic legal code and “de-Baathification” on the scale they wanted, but pressured to renounce their call for a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops. A large proportion of the so-called reconstruction spending has not gone into building projects or providing business opportunities for the Iraqi elite, but into paying for the services of the host of security firms that are assisting the US military suppress the ongoing resistance.

The scenes in the parliament on Tuesday are the result. The Iraqi politicians conveyed frustration at their mistreatment by US imperialism, combined with demagogic attempts to maintain some credibility by denouncing the brutal and anti-democratic nature of the occupation they have supported. They are aware that the issue of US military abuse resonates among millions of Iraqis. Tens of thousands of people have experienced treatment at the hands of

American soldiers similar to or far worse than that meted out to Shaik.

The US military response has been of a piece with its reactions to every other exposure of its thuggery in Iraq. While expressing “regret”, it has rejected Shaik’s accusations and put forward a totally opposed version of events. According to an initial American “investigation”, Shaik was responsible for the incident as he pulled his car out of the queue, drove over a median strip and approached the checkpoint from the wrong lane. He then allegedly got out of car and engaged in a “verbal and physical altercation” with an Iraqi translator. US troops only “intervened and rendered assistance to diffuse the situation” by “holding Mr Shaik momentarily”.

While it is not possible at this stage to say exactly what happened, previous cases indicate that the story is probably another crude cover up. In March, for instance, US troops opened fire on the vehicle carrying Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena, killing an Italian intelligence agent and wounding Sgrena. Directly contradicting the eyewitness testimony of the two surviving Italians, the US claimed the vehicle drove at high speeds toward a checkpoint and ignored repeated instructions to stop by American soldiers.

The assault on Shaik and the anger in the Iraqi parliament has received noticeably little coverage in the US media. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, for example, have not reported it. The silence is understandable. Tuesday’s events do not fit with the propaganda of the American establishment that the Iraq war is bringing about a “democratic revolution” in the Middle East. Instead, even the most venal collaborators of the occupation among the legislators have responded to this incident by damning talk of democracy as a sham.



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