

# Hundreds swept up in Baghdad crackdown

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The US military-Iraqi government crackdown in Baghdad, codenamed Operation Lightning, is being condemned by Iraqi political leaders and clerics as a campaign of intimidation directed against the population of predominantly Sunni Muslim suburbs.

On Friday, Mahmoud al-Sumaidie, a representative of the Sunni-based Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), told a congregation at the large Sunni Um al-Qura mosque: "I appeal to every official here in Iraq to stop humiliating people and end the raiding campaign". A leader of the Sunni-based Iraqi Islamic Party (IPP), Iyal al-Ezzi, declared: "During this operation, they arrest our sons for the simple fact of being Sunni."

Hundreds of Iraqis demonstrated following the Friday prayer services in Baghdad, carrying a banner labelling the operation "American Terrorism" and another demanding "Go Home American Troops".

In the first week of the operation, more than 700 people have been detained in the city's western suburbs, while more than 250 have reportedly been rounded up in sweeps through towns and villages south of the capital. According to the Iraqi interior ministry, 28 alleged resistance fighters have been killed. Roadblocks have been thrown up at all 23 major entrances to the capital and hundreds of checkpoints have been established across the city.

Insurgents responded on Friday with mortar attacks on US positions around Baghdad Airport and roadside bombs targeting military convoys.

The aim of the operation is as much to terrorise Baghdad residents as to round up or kill armed resistance fighters. With the sympathy of much of the city's population, insurgents have been able to sustain continuous attacks on American forces in the capital since Baghdad fell to the invading US troops in April 2003.

One of the main Iraqi units involved in the sweeps through Baghdad's suburbs is the 12,000-strong

Special Police Commandos or "Wolf Brigades", which were formed last year from former members of Saddam Hussein's hated secret police and Republican Guard.

The repression and brutality used to defend the previous regime is now being deployed to defend the US occupation and the US-backed Iraqi government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. The commandos and their US advisors have been used in operations to restore occupation control over the Sunni cities of Ramadi, Samarra and Mosul. According to the *New York Times*, the commander of the US operatives attached to the unit, James Steele, led the American special forces who trained the right-wing death squads in El Salvador during the 1980s.

Victims of the raids last week have alleged that the US and Iraqi forces are carrying out indiscriminate arrests, beating and traumatising people, deliberately ransacking houses and stealing property.

The Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman* reported on June 4 that, in the southern districts being targeted by Operation Lightning, "residents say the troops usually round up men in the towns and villages covered by their sweeps and take them into custody, while keeping children and women under armed guard."

Jaafari's new government was forced over the weekend to respond to the widespread claims of abuse by the US-recruited Iraqi forces. Laith Kuba, a spokesman for the prime minister told Associated Press that the government could not "rule it out" that its troops had "helped themselves to cash and other items".

In many cases, people are being taken away by US and Iraqi troops on little more than unsubstantiated claims by an informant that they are supporters of the armed resistance.

In a major embarrassment for the US military, one of the first Baghdad residents detained on the basis of false information was the leader of the Iraqi Islamic

Party (IPP), Mohsen Abd al-Hamid. Acting on allegations that the political figure was hiding insurgents in his home, American troops smashed into his house last Monday morning, broke apart furniture while conducting a search and dragged Hamid, his sons and his bodyguards away.

The Bush administration has been seeking to convince Hamid to end his party's opposition to the US-dictated referendums and elections scheduled to be held over the next six months. The IPP, along with the Association of Muslim Scholars, led the call for a boycott of the January 30 elections.

While Hamid was released within 12 hours and the US military has stated he was detained by mistake, the fact that one of the most prominent and influential Sunni bourgeois politicians could fall victim to the US dragnet has become a focus point for denunciations of the entire operation.

The author of the Iraqi web blog *Baghdad Burning* commented on May 30: "If this was really a mistake, then just imagine how many other 'mistakes' are being unfairly detained and possibly tortured in places like Abu Ghraib... Was it [Hamid's arrest] meant to send a message to Sunnis? That's what some people are saying. Many people believe it was meant to tell Sunnis, 'None of you are safe—even the ones who work with us'. It's just difficult to believe this is one big misunderstanding or mistake."

Compelled to respond to widespread popular anger over the detentions, hundreds of representatives of the parties that dominate the Iraqi government, the Shiite fundamentalist Daawa Party and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, signed a statement on Friday condemning Hamid's arrest as "unacceptable" and demanding that "American forces should respect human rights and halt abusive detentions and arrests".

Just days earlier, on May 31, Jaafari had told a press conference in Baghdad that the US and other foreign troops "are not occupying forces, they are friendly forces, and they are helping us to establish security, carrying out missions in the interests of the Iraqi people, and under the authority of the Iraqi government".

The reality is Jaafari's government is no more than a figurehead for an illegal US military occupation, which, as the operation in Baghdad underscores, is being maintained through the ever-more ruthless repression of

the opposition among the Iraqi people.



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