

# Violence against occupation opponents continues in lead-up to Iraq election

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In contrast to Washington's propaganda that a stable democracy is emerging in Iraq, a campaign of terror and intimidation is continuing against opponents of the US occupation in the weeks leading up to the December 15 election.

The November 13 exposure of a secret prison in Baghdad, where American troops found interior ministry police commandos torturing alleged members of the guerilla resistance, has been followed this week by the blatant assassination of a Sunni Arab leader.

At 4 a.m. on November 23, dozens of men wearing Iraqi army uniforms sealed off the streets and forced their way into the Baghdad home of 70-year-old Sheik Kadhim Sarhid Hemaiyem, a leader of one of the largest Sunni tribes, the Dulaimi. Many members of the tribe reportedly support or participate in the armed resistance to the US occupation. In a matter of minutes, the elderly sheik, three of his sons and a son-in-law were gunned down.

Over recent weeks, the sheik had been giving political and practical support to an election campaign by his brother. Whereas the overwhelming majority of Sunni Arabs boycotted the elections in January, millions may cast a ballot on December 15. This follows calls by religious and tribal leaders such as Hemaiyem for opponents of the occupation to vote. Sunni-based parties could win 15 to 20 percent of the seats in the next parliament.

A police spokesman claimed the killers were "terrorists" seeking to intimidate Sunnis into not voting. However, the sheik's brother, Abdel Moniem Sarhid Hemaiyem, rejected the allegation, telling the *Los Angeles Times*: "They attacked us at 4 a.m., during the curfew, so they had to be from the authorities. I want to ask the ministers of defence and interior ... why are they killing us?"

A spokesman for the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), the umbrella organisation for thousands of Sunni clerics, also blamed the interior ministry, stating: "We warn the government against continuing this tyranny."

The major Shiite parties in the government are the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'awa organisation of the current prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. SCIRI leader Bayan Jabr is the interior minister. Many interior ministry officials and police are allegedly members of SCIRI's Badr Organisation militia, which was formed in Iran in the 1980s to fight against the Iraqi military in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.

Both Da'awa and SCIRI backed the US invasion in 2003, seeing it as the means of gaining power and privilege for the Shiite

religious elite, which had been sidelined by the previous predominantly Sunni Baathist regime. In the elections in January this year, the Sunni boycott and a large Shiite turnout enabled the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to win close to 48 percent of the vote and more than half the seats in the parliament.

After the Jaafari government was formed in April and SCIRI took control of the interior ministry, reports of extra-judicial killings steadily increased. The British *Independent's* Iraq correspondent Kim Sengupta commented on November 20: "Behind the daily reports of suicide bombings and attacks on coalition forces is a far more shadowy struggle, one that involves tortured prisoners huddled in dungeons, death-squad victims with their hands tied behind their backs, often mutilated with knives and electric drills, and distraught families searching for relations who have been 'disappeared'."

The *Observer* reported the same day that human rights groups claimed to have "hundreds of cases on their books" of Iraqis who had "disappeared" into the hands of government security forces.

The violence has fueled the sectarian tensions between Shiites and Sunnis. Sunni extremist groups such as Al Qaeda are carrying out increasingly frequent suicide and car bombings on Shiite civilian targets, killing and maiming hundreds every month. The *New York Times* reported on November 20 that as many as 20 cities and towns around Baghdad are "segregating," with Sunni and Shiite families having to abandon their homes in areas where their sect was the minority.

The dirty war of death squads and torture could not be taking place without the full knowledge of the White House, the US military or the US intelligence agencies. The activities of the Iraqi government are scrutinised by the largest American embassy in the world with over 3,000 officials. US advisors have been slotted into every ministry. For decades, the use of death squads has been a hallmark of US operations from South East Asia to Latin America.

While there have been hypocritical expressions of shock over the Baghdad torture centre from Washington, the primary motive for the raid by the US military on November 13 was not to end such activities. Rather, it appears to have been to weaken SCIRI's position. The organisation has close links to Iran, one of the next potential targets of American and British aggression.

Moreover, while SCIRI has collaborated fully with the occupation, its influence in the government is viewed as an obstacle to convincing more of the Sunni elite to end their support for the resistance and accept a role in the US puppet state.

American and British plans to withdraw troops have been hinged on Iraqi government forces being able to deal with the predominantly Sunni insurgency.

The UIA as a whole has been discredited by the confirmation of the widespread rumours that the Shiite-dominated government is repressing its rivals using almost identical methods as the former Baathist regime. Hazim al-Nuaimy, a politics professor at Baghdad's Mustansiriya University told Reuters: "The prisoner torture scandal will have an impact on the prime minister and his interior minister. It will have a negative impact on voting for his list [the UIA] at the elections, at least among intellectuals and the better educated."

Even before the November 13 raid, the UIA's electoral prospects were declining. The two main factors in the large turnout in the January election were a religious edict by Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani instructing Shiites to vote, and the UIA's promises to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops and improve living standards. Da'awa and SCIRI abandoned their pledges as soon as the election was over. Their collaboration with the occupation has produced widespread alienation among ordinary Shiites. Reflecting the anger toward the governing parties, Sistani has refused to endorse the UIA in the coming ballot.

The Bush administration has made no secret of whom it hopes will benefit. Ahmed Chalabi and Iyad Allawi have both been promoted in the US press as Washington's favoured candidates to head the next government. Both are longtime CIA assets and advocates of the privatisation of the oil industry. They are secular Shiites who have collaborated with the US plans to invade Iraq since 1991. Allawi, an ex-Baathist, with ties to the Sunni establishment and former Iraqi military, was installed by the White House as Iraq's interim prime minister in 2004.

Chalabi's return to prominence is particularly noteworthy. In early 2004, as the Bush administration reversed his policy of de-Baathification, Chalabi was pushed aside and accused of being an Iranian spy. He developed relations with the Shiite fundamentalists and secured the position of deputy prime minister in the government. Last week, he was feted in Washington with private meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The *Washington Post* referred to him on November 17 as "the choice of many US officials".

Either Chalabi or Allawi would be considered by Washington as a far more reliable prime minister than Jaafari or the SCIRI leadership. After the December election, the primary tasks of the first so-called "sovereign government" will be selling off Iraq's oil to US energy corporations and sanctioning permanent US military bases in the country. In a report published this month, the London-based environmental and social justice network "Platform" provided an insight into what is at stake. The report revealed that foreign energy companies could reap between \$US74 billion and \$194 billion in revenue over 30 years from the first 12 oil fields contracted out.

In order to secure Iraq for US interests, the American military is continuing to unleash brutal offensives on rebellious areas of the country. This month, 2,500 US marines and up to 1,500 Iraqi government troops carried out assaults on Husayba, a town of

30,000 on the Iraq-Syria border near the major city of Qaim, and the nearby towns of Karabilah and Ubaydi. The American Forces Press Service reported they were "clearing the city house by house". Dozens of air strikes were carried out, reducing numbers of buildings to rubble.

The purported targets were so-called "foreign fighters" aligned with Al Qaeda crossing into Iraq from Syria to carry out attacks on US forces. According to Iraqi doctors, however, dozens of the dead were civilians, including women and children. At least 10 air strikes were launched on November 6 alone.

Thousands fled their homes to escape the bombardment. Karim Ayaj, a teacher in Husayba, told CNN on November 13 that as many as 28,000 people were living in palm groves and tents on the outskirts of the town and suffering from shortages of food and medicine.

The areas being savaged by the US offensive are in the predominantly Sunni Arab-populated Anbar province, where 97 percent of people who voted in the October 15 referendum on a new constitution rejected the US-vetted document. The province has been subjected to continuous repression since the 2003 invasion. An unknown number of people, possibly as many as 6,000, were killed during the marine assaults on the city of Fallujah in April and November 2004. The capital Ramadi has been the scene of constant American raids and clashes between guerillas and US troops.

According to the US military, at least 700 alleged insurgents have been killed during offensives against the resistance strongholds along the Syrian border since September. No figure has been released for civilian casualties. As many as 1,500 men have been detained. On November 1, the US military admitted to holding 13,900 Iraqis in custody.

Dozens of American families have also paid a bitter price. The fighting has helped push US casualties to an average of three dead and at least 20 wounded per day. The monthly toll for October—96 dead and some 600 wounded—was the largest since January.



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