

Iraq: US mosque massacre deepens occupation's crisis

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The massacre of as many as 40 unarmed worshipers in a northeast Baghdad mosque Sunday has triggered a political crisis that threatens to accelerate Iraq's descent into civil war while sharply intensifying the hatred of millions of Iraqis for the three-year-old US occupation of their country.

Reuters news agency Monday cited Iraq's security minister accusing "US and Iraqi forces of killing 37 unarmed civilians in the mosque after tying them up." Other police sources said that the victims numbered around 20.

While US military sources and Iraqi eyewitnesses have given conflicting versions of the bloodbath, it is undisputed that killings were carried out early Sunday evening by a combined force of US special forces and US-trained Iraqi commandos.

The mosque where the massacre unfolded is in a neighborhood that is a stronghold of the Mehdi Army, the militia loyal to the radical nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al Sadr. While those killed apparently included some of his followers, others were apparently members of Dawa, which is the party of Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, and other Shiite parties.

The evidence supporting the claims that what took place was a massacre organized and executed by the US occupation authorities is overwhelming. Video footage broadcast over Iraqi television and photographs shot at the scene clearly depict unarmed bodies, many of them elderly men, heaped on the carpeted floor of a prayer room in the Mustafa mosque.

As outrage over the incident erupted in Iraq, Washington sought to distance itself from the killings. The shifting US account of the incident suggested a crude attempt at cover-up. Initially, Centcom, the US regional military command, reported that 16 "insurgents" had been killed in a raid conducted by US and Iraqi troops in Adhamiyah, a former Baathist stronghold, where Saddam Hussein was seen surrounded by a cheering crowd after the US invasion had begun.

As it became indisputable that the action had been carried out not against Sunni insurgents in Adhamiyah, but rather a mosque in a nearby Shiite neighborhood, US authorities backpedaled on the role played by the American military. "This was an Iraqi planned and led operation and US forces were only in an advisory capacity," a State Department spokesman declared Monday.

The corpses, however, were surrounded by shell casings from 5.56mm bullets, the ammunition issued exclusively to US troops in Iraq. Parts of the mosque had been damaged by fire, substantiating witness accounts that the building had been struck by rockets fired

from US warplanes.

Witnesses also reported that before the shooting, helicopters were seen hovering over the neighborhood, while armored Humvees sealed off surrounding streets.

At least one witness told Iraqi state television that the victims had gathered in the mosque to hold a funeral service for a man killed in an earlier attack.

According to some accounts, the killings in the mosque took place amid a firefight between the US-led commando force and members of the Mehdi Army militia.

The blistering reaction from the Iraqi government as well as the state-run media, characterized by an unprecedented level of hostility to the US occupation, reflected both the seriousness of the incident and the sharply deteriorating relations between Washington and the Iraqi Shiite parties that dominate the US-installed government.

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the Shiite bloc that holds the largest number of seats in the Iraqi parliament, issued a statement blasting the raid as a "crime."

"US forces and Iraqi special forces committed a heinous crime by attacking the Mustafa mosque in the neighborhood of Ur," said the statement, read to the media by Jawad Maliki, the deputy leader of Prime Minister Jaafari's Dawa Party. "It is a serious crime with grave political and security implications which aims to provoke civil war in the country," Maliki said.

"Killing a large number of followers of the Prophet's house (Shiites) after having bound and tortured them is unjustifiable. It is an attack on the dignity of the Iraqis and destroys the credibility of slogans of liberty and democratic and pluralism brandished by the US administration," the statement continued.

The UIA demanded an immediate investigation into the massacre and called for the US occupation to turn over control of all security operations to the Iraqi government. Iraqi officials said that they had no prior notification of the planned raid on the mosque.

Finally, the statement declared: "The government must also find out the truth about these special units in the Iraqi army that function outside the control of the government and perpetrate massacres with support from the US army," the statement added. "The existence of these forces, if it is confirmed, is another element contributing to civil war."

The units, which include the Wolf Brigade and other paramilitary outfits, were trained by US personnel, including

veterans of Washington's dirty wars in Central America, where death squads formed a key weapon in the attempt to suppress insurgencies against US-backed dictatorships.

Iraq's interior minister, Bayan Jabr Solagh, said Monday that the killings were "unjustified." In an interview with the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya television, he stated, "It was an unjustified aggression against the faithful at prayer in a mosque."

Solagh added, "The operation was not under the control of the police but by the army, and the police were not authorized to enter the area."

In a statement read over Iraqi television, Prime Minister Jaafari also seemed to suggest that the massacre was part of a conspiracy aimed at pushing the country deeper into civil war.

"We call upon the sons of our people to be aware of what is being plotted against the country," he said. "We hope that they will have patience until the conclusion of the ongoing, immediate investigations."

The charge was echoed by a leading Sunni politician. Saleh Mutlak, of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as saying, "We are trying to dissolve the militias and stop the bloodshed. This act by American troops will pull us into civil war."

The raid was seen by many as an implementation by means of naked force of the demand by US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad that the government move to disband militias linked to political parties. In particular, Washington has shown concern over al-Sadr's Mehdi Army, which twice clashed with US forces in several cities in 2004.

On the same day as the raid in Baghdad, a mortar shell landed near al-Sadr's home in Najaf, inflicting several casualties and narrowly missing the Shiite cleric. He responded by calling upon his followers to "exercise self-restraint and to remain calm, so as to foil the plots of the occupation authorities to provoke armed conflict, and rather to practice political resistance in order to expel the foreigners from Iraq."

The mosque massacre was only one element of the carnage that continued to spread throughout Iraq.

On Sunday night, villagers northeast of Baghdad reported finding some 30 corpses, most of them beheaded, dumped on the main road. The bodies of 12 other men who had apparently been tortured and garroted were discovered in Baghdad Monday at a site used for selling used cars.

Also on Monday, 40 people were killed and another 20 wounded when a suicide bomber blew himself up amid a crowd of men waiting to apply to join the Iraqi army at a recruitment center near the town of Tal Afar.

Scores of bodies are now being found every day in Iraq, with such gruesome discoveries becoming so routine that they barely merit a mention in the local press.

While the Bush administration continues its efforts to promote the US war in Iraq as a struggle for democracy, the reality for the Iraqi people is an unending and hellish nightmare. The death toll since the invasion three years ago now undoubtedly numbers in the hundreds of thousands, with no accurate record being kept of the daily fatalities resulting from US raids, air strikes, terrorist bombings and death squad killings.

The killings of innocents carried out by US troops, increasingly operating jointly with US-trained Iraqi units, have clearly escalated as the resistance and the political crisis in Iraq have both intensified. Such incidents are barely reported by the US media, and virtually only when they have been documented by videotaped evidence.

The mounting charges by disparate Iraqi political parties that Washington is deliberately orchestrating a civil war as a means of decimating organized resistance to the occupation and thereby pursuing its aims of US domination over the country's oil wealth are well founded.

The increasingly desperate US strategy appears to be that of manipulating tensions between Sunnis and Shiites and utilizing sectarian-based violence as a weapon, while attempting to regulate and control it so that it serves US interests.

This vicious strategy found vocal support from one of the media's most consistent and loathsome cheerleaders for the Iraq war, *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer. In a column published Friday under the headline "Of course it's a civil war," Krauthammer took to task some of his fellow right-wingers, such as William F. Buckley, who have reacted to the growing sectarian violence by declaring a US defeat in Iraq.

He mocks such "waverers" for being "shocked, shocked to find Iraqis going after Iraqis." The *Post* columnist continues:

"But is it not US counterinsurgency strategy to get Iraqis who believe in the new Iraq to fight Iraqis who want to restore Baathism or impose Taliban-like rule? Does not everyone who wishes the US well support the strategy of standing up the Iraqis so we can stand down? And does that not mean getting the Iraqis to fight the civil war themselves?"

He urges his readers to put the mass murder taking place in Iraq "in perspective ... it does have the effect of concentrating Sunni minds on the price of their continuing support for the random, large-scale and heretofore unanswered slaughter of Shias that they either actively or passively support."

Nothing could more clearly express the abject criminality of Washington's project of creating a "new Iraq"—a subjugated US semi-colony—by bleeding the country white.



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