

Iraq: Who did the US military massacre near Najaf?

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2 February 2007

Many aspects of what transpired last Sunday on the outskirts of the southern Iraqi city of Najaf are confused and unclear. But one thing is certain: American and British jets and helicopters killed hundreds of men who were resisting an assault by Iraqi government troops on the village of Zarqa. Who the men were is still the subject of controversy. However, an increasing number of credible reports have been published alleging that the official version of events is a crude attempt to cover up a terrible massacre.

Iraqi authorities have claimed that the defenders of Zarqa were members of the “Soldiers of Heaven”, a Shiite splinter group, which was conspiring to attack the Ashura religious festival in Najaf on Monday and assassinate the top Shiite clergy, including religious leader Ali al-Sistani. Government troops, acting on a tip-off, launched a pre-emptive attack but were beaten back. Iraqi and American ground reinforcements were called in and repeated US and British air strikes razed much of the village.

The outcome was a slaughter. Iraqi officials claim that 263 sect members were killed and another 400 taken prisoner—of whom 210 were wounded. A correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* who visited the scene on Tuesday described a compound of eight farms, surrounded by a defensive berm and trench, which had been devastated by US airpower. The newspaper wrote: “Mangled bodies filled the trenches... contorted and burned from the bombing campaign. A few were blown to pieces. The fighters included young boys as well as middle-aged men. Some apparently held ordinary day jobs.”

The *Los Angeles Times* correspondent reported that he saw a copy of a newspaper published by the Soldiers of Heaven and that he was shown a book outlining the group’s beliefs, which allegedly had been found at the scene.

The Soldiers of Heaven is a doomsday cult that believes that the Imam Mahdi has returned—a figure in Shiite theology who will come back to earth in a time of evil, end the breach between Shiite and Sunni Muslims and bring peace to the world. A Shiite cleric, Ahmad al-Hussan al-Yamami, reportedly claimed in 1999 to have met the Mahdi

and has subsequently built a congregation of about 5,000 in the major southern city of Basra. Both Shiites and Sunnis joined the cult.

A man named Abdul Zahra has been identified as the person who claimed to be the returned imam. The Iraqi government alleges that he was among those killed on Sunday. Other articles report Ahmad al-Hussan was slain as well.

The alleged motive for seeking to murder Sistani and other leading Shiite clerics was to eliminate the religious opposition to their claim that Abdul Zahra was the Mahdi. Major General Hussein Kamal, the Iraqi interior ministry undersecretary for security, told Associated Press: “They started surfacing two years ago as a political movement in southern Iraq and gained followers. In the end they carried arms against the state.” The Soldiers of Heaven, the Iraqi government insists, intended to enter Najaf posing as Ashura pilgrims, kill the clerical hierarchy, take control of the Imam Ali mosque and proclaim the Mahdi’s return. The apparent aim was to trigger a wholesale uprising against the US occupation.

This entire story has been dismissed as a fabrication by the Iraqi newspaper *Azzaman*, Patrick Cockburn writing in the British *Independent*, and Dahr Jamail, writing for the International Press Service (IPS). Both Cockburn and Jamail write from Iraq and have built up a number of independent sources over the past four years. In 2004, Jamail played a central role in exposing US military war crimes in the city of Fallujah, such as the use of phosphorous bombs against civilian targets, indiscriminate killings by marine snipers and the strafing of ambulances.

All three articles have reported that the people slaughtered at Zarqa were members of two Arab tribes, the Hawatim or al-Hatami and the Khaza’il or al-Khazaali, who reportedly oppose the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the Iraqi government. Fighting broke out after a soldier at an Iraqi military checkpoint fired on a Hawatim convoy making its way toward Najaf to participate in the Ashura celebrations. Their leader and his wife were killed,

provoking a retaliatory attack by the tribesmen. Khazaali tribesmen en route to Najaf also came under fire and joined the battle against the government troops, who called in reinforcements and, ultimately, US air strikes.

Dahr Jamail reported: “The fighting took place on the Diwaniya-Najaf road and spread into nearby date-palm plantations after pilgrims sought refuge there. ‘American helicopters participated in the slaughter’, Jassim Abbas, a farmer from the area told IPS. ‘They were soon there to kill the pilgrims without hesitation but they were never there for helping Iraqis in anything they need. We just watched them killed group by group while trapped in those plantations’. Much of the killing was done by US and British warplanes, eyewitnesses said.”

Abdulimam Jabbar, a representative of the Soldiers of Heaven in Basra, has denied that the sect was involved at all. He told *Azzaman*: “This is part of a propaganda campaign to discredit our group”. The sect, he declared, was “peaceful and does not believe at all in violence”. This was supported by Reider Visser, the editor of the Iraqi history website www.historiae.org, who told Reuters there “was no record of them using violence in the past”.

Cockburn has suggested in the *Independent* that the accusation that the Soldiers of Heaven were involved is an attempt by the Iraqi government to cover up its use of US airpower to slaughter tribal opponents. He reported: “The messianic group led by Ahmad al-Hassani, which was already at odds with the Iraqi authorities in Najaf, was drawn into the fighting because it was based in Zarqa and its presence provided a convenient excuse for what was in effect a massacre. The Hawatim and Khaza'il tribes are opposed to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'wa Party, who both control Najaf and make up the core of the Baghdad government.”

According to sources cited by Dahr Jamail, the tribes have called for the building of a united movement to oppose the sectarian civil war taking place between Sunni and Shiite extremists and to end the control of the government by Shiite fundamentalist parties.

As the controversy developed, the Iraqi government embellished its conspiracy theory yesterday with accusations that Ahmad al-Hassan was in fact a former intelligence operative of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime. Contradictory claims were made by officials, with some asserting he had links to the Sunni extremists of Al Qaeda, and others declaring he was financed by the Shiite regime in Iran. The *New York Times* noted that the reports have “only added to confusion about who exactly the Americans and Iraqis had fought in a long battle beginning Sunday”.

The truth may not be known for some time. What can be said, however, is that the massive firepower unleashed

indiscriminately at Zarqa reflects the tenuous control the US military and the Iraqi government exert over the country, including in the predominantly Shiite south of the country.

The battle was the bloodiest in southern Iraq since the end of a short-lived uprising by supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in mid-2004. Last year, the southern provinces were relatively stable. The opposition of millions of Shiites toward the US occupation was diverted by Shiite fundamentalist parties such as SCIRI, Da'wa and the Sadrist into participation in the December 2005 elections. They won support by promising to use the US-established parliament to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of the foreign occupiers and bring about rapid improvements in the catastrophic living conditions that face the working class and rural poor.

The illusions that existed a year ago have been dashed. Social conditions have worsened; sectarian tensions have burgeoned into civil war; and the US military is increasing its troop numbers. The resulting alienation and anger is aggravating the numerous currents of opposition that exist toward the US occupation and its puppets in Baghdad.

Whether the slaughter outside Najaf was inflicted on a cult, anti-government tribesmen or a combination of both, it demonstrates that the illegal American presence in Iraq can only be continued by repression and indiscriminate killing in every part of the country. The scale of the massacre is a warning of what is being prepared as US operations are stepped up in Baghdad under Bush's planned “surge”.



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