

Iraq: US occupation sets off sectarian atrocities in Tal Afar

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After suffering four years of US occupation, constant violence and unspeakable living conditions, communities in some of the most traumatised cities in Iraq are facing a new wave of sectarian and politically motivated killings, provoked by the stepped up operations being carried out by American troops and the predominantly Shiite and Kurdish Iraqi government security forces against largely Sunni insurgents.

Shiites in Tal Afar were brutally targeted by suspected Sunni extremists on Tuesday. The Sunni population in the north-west Iraqi city was subjected to a massive US attack in late 2005 and has lived since under the guns of Kurdish and Shiite police and troops. On Tuesday, a man drove an explosives-packed truck into a Shiite neighbourhood and attracted a large crowd around the vehicle by announcing he was distributing flour from a humanitarian organisation. As families gathered in the hope of food assistance, the bomber blew up the truck.

A second bomber detonated a car bomb in a busy Shiite shopping area a short time later, collapsing buildings and homes and inflicting carnage. As many as 80 people, mainly women and children, were killed by the two blasts. At least another 185 were wounded. According to one report, gunmen fired on ambulances attempting to take the casualties to medical facilities. The Tal Afar hospital, which has never recovered from the US assault on the city 18 months ago, was unable to cope with the number of injured.

Shiite police and militiamen retaliated by massacring civilians in Sunni areas. According to Sunni political organisations, police and masked gunmen rampaged during the night, smashing into homes, dragging men into the streets and shooting them through the head. An Iraqi Army commander told Associated Press that 70 men were murdered and another 40 had been kidnapped. In an attempt to prevent the killings, the Iraqi government ordered army units into the Sunni suburbs and confined the police to their barracks. As many as 18 Shiite police were arrested but, according to the provincial governor, were released to prevent “unrest”. Relations between Shiites and Sunnis within the city have been left in a poisoned state.

The situation in Tal Afar is a sharp warning of what the Bush administration’s “surge” in Iraq is likely to produce. President Bush and US military commanders have repeatedly held up the massive assault on the city in late 2005 as an example of how a

flood of American and government troops into a volatile part of Iraq produces “stability”. This week’s sectarian atrocities highlight the reality. The US and mainly Shiite government forces have brutalised the city’s Sunni community, among whom insurgents were based, provoking suicide attacks against innocent Shiite civilians. Far from stability, US operations are aggravating sectarian tensions and fuelling the civil war that is now raging across much of the country.

In Diyala province, where American and government troops are conducting sustained operations against Sunni insurgents, reports came in Wednesday that Sunni fundamentalists are now ordering Shiite and Kurdish families to leave their villages or be killed. Dozens of alleged Sunni guerillas have been killed or captured over the past several weeks in and near the province capital, Baquba.

Sectarian violence between rival Sunni and Shiite groups is also ongoing throughout Baghdad, amid the deployment of thousands of additional US and government troops. Each day this week, the mutilated bodies of Sunni men have been found dumped in various parts of the city—most likely the victims of Shiite militia death squads.

In Hilla, a city to the south of Baghdad, Shiite militias reportedly carried out revenge attacks on three Sunni mosques on Tuesday, following the bombing of a Shiite place of worship on the weekend. On Saturday, unknown gunmen fired on children playing soccer in a Shiite neighbourhood. On Tuesday, four people were killed and 14 wounded when mortar shells were indiscriminately fired into a Shiite district. A car bomb killed at least two people in another Shiite district the following day.

Yesterday was the bloodiest day of all. Five suicide bombings took place in Shiite areas in or close to Baghdad. At least 79 people were slaughtered and over 80 wounded when two bombers detonated explosives strapped to their bodies in the middle of the Shalal market in the Shaab district of the capital. Three vehicle bombs—including one hidden inside an ambulance—were exploded in the town of Khalis, north of Baghdad, killing 43 and wounding another 86.

In the predominantly Sunni Arab cities of Fallujah and Ramadi in Anbar province, which have been devastated by constant battles between insurgents and occupation troops since

the March 2003 invasion, US policies have provoked bloody fighting between local tribes and guerillas loyal to Sunni religious groups. Over recent months, American commanders in Anbar have spent considerable amounts of time and money attempting to bribe Arab tribes away from supporting the insurgency. Islamic extremists believed to be linked to Al Qaeda are now responding in murderous fashion.

In Ramadi, a suicide bomber blew up a car on Tuesday outside a restaurant frequented by members of an Arab tribe whose sheik has begun assisting US and government troops. In western Baghdad, two suicide bombers killed the son of another Sunni tribal sheik who has publicly declared opposition to Al Qaeda.

In Fallujah, two suicide bombers were intercepted on Wednesday as they attempted to drive trucks laden with chlorine into the offices of the city mayor. Gunfire detonated the vehicles, forcing dozens of American and Iraqi soldiers to seek treatment for chlorine inhalation. The attack came in the wake of another chlorine bombing two weeks ago against a village of the Albu Issa tribe—a large Arab tribe in the area that has refused to pledge allegiance to fundamentalist parties who have declared Anbar province to be an Islamic state. Dozens of people, including children, were poisoned. At least eight attacks using chlorine have taken place this year. Tribe members, many of whom fought US troops during the battles in Fallujah during 2004, are now alleged to be assisting government forces hunting down Islamic militants.

The sectarian carnage is the focus of media coverage in the United States and internationally for an obvious reason: it is used to justify the false claim by the Bush administration that American troops are engaged in a struggle against terrorists who would carry out mass killings if the occupation were ended.

Millions of Iraqis are aware, however, that the divisions tearing apart the country have been directly stoked by the US occupation since 2003. Until now, the various puppet governments permitted to function in Baghdad have been explicitly based on the interests of small Shiite and Kurdish elites, who have been offered a minor stake in the wealth that will be plundered as the country's oil and gas resources are opened up to transnational energy conglomerates. The Sunni population, from which the former Baathist regime derived most of its support, has been marginalised.

The Shiite working class—which is so often the target of Sunni extremist attacks—has also gained nothing from US occupation but impoverishment and is equally hostile to the presence of American troops. One of the major aims of the US surge is the repression of Shiite opposition in the working class suburb of Sadr City, where sectarian atrocities against Shiite civilians have been followed by bitter demonstrations demanding the immediate withdrawal of US forces from the country.

The stepped-up counter-insurgency operations have only added to the seething anger in Sunni areas and among Shiite

urban poor. The *New York Times* reported on Wednesday that Iraqi government prisons are overflowing with detainees who were rounded up during street sweeps during February. One prison was found to have over 700 people crammed into an area designed to accommodate just 75.

The prisoners are both Sunni and Shiite. Over the past several months, hundreds of men have been detained as alleged members of the Mahdi Army Shiite militia, which is primarily based in Sadr City and is accused of staging attacks on US forces.

Insurgents demonstrated again this week their ability to strike at the very centre of the US occupation when they unleashed a barrage of rockets into the highly defended Green Zone on Tuesday. One American soldier and a civilian contractor were killed. Last week, another attack on the Green Zone saw a rocket detonate just 50 metres from where Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki was in talks with United Nations secretary general Ban Ki-moon.

Since George Bush announced the surge of troops on January 10, American deaths have averaged close to three per day, with at least another 20 wounded. Total US casualties have now reached 3,245 dead, 24,314 combat wounded and over 25,000 non-combat medical evacuations. Iraqi soldiers and police collaborating with the US forces are being killed and injured in even greater numbers.

The broad opposition to the occupation among Iraqis of all backgrounds underscores the reactionary character of the sectarian violence. Bombings and massacres such as those that occurred in Tal Afar serve only to divert the resistance of the Iraqi people into the dead-end of communalism and away from a unified struggle against the US attempt to subjugate the country.



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