Hundreds killed in bombings targeting Iraqi minority group

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As many as 500 people may have been killed in a series of truck bombings in two northern Iraq villages Tuesday night. The horrific massacre targeted members of the Yazidi sect, a minority religious group among the Kurdish population that lives an isolated existence in villages in the northwest corner of Iraq, near the Syrian border.

According to survivors of the bloodbath, four large gravel trucks were the instruments of the attack, three driven by suicide bombers into the village of Qataniyah (named Tal al Azizziyah in Kurdish), one into the neighboring village of Jazeera (in Kurdish, Sheikh Khadar). The massive explosions that ensued virtually leveled the first village, and most of the clay brick structures in both villages were knocked down or heavily damaged.

The death toll is the largest of any single act of violence since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003. Victims overflowed hospitals in the cities closest to the scene, including Dahuk and Tell Afar, and morgues were so full that corpses had to be stacked outside.

No group has issued a claim of responsibility, but the Yazidi sect has been under assault from Sunni fundamentalist groups, particularly Islamic State in Iraq, the umbrella group that includes Al Qaeda in Iraq, which distributed leaflets in the area threatening the Yazidi population.

The mayor of Sinjar, a Yazidi village near the two attacked Tuesday, told the press that the leaflets “were clear and candid threats that these people have left the Islamic faith and are not good people anymore, and that they should leave the land of Iraq because they have left the true faith.”

Despite the simplistic Bush administration presentation of the Sunni-Shia divide in Iraq, there are actually dozens of religious minorities in the country, products of a complex historical development in which various pre-Christian, Christian and Islamic strands are interwoven. The Yazidi faith, with an estimated 400,000 adherents, represents a combination of Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia, and elements of Islam.

In April, tensions between Yazidis and Sunni Arabs erupted in Mosul, the largest city in northern Iraq, when a group of Yazidi men stoned to death a teenage girl, their relative, whom they accused of betraying her religion by converting to Islam and planning to marry a Sunni man. Two weeks later, Sunni gunmen stopped a local bus, took off 23 Yazidi laborers, and executed them. With a pogrom atmosphere developing in Mosul, many Yazidis began leaving the city.

The villages attacked Tuesday were settled by Yazidi refugees from an earlier persecution, launched by the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1975, as part of his efforts to ensure an Arab majority in those parts of northern Iraq nearest to the oilfields of Kirkuk. Unlike other Kurds, however, the Yazidis have not sought to return to their old homes in the mountains, but put down roots on the edge of the desert, in the far western part of Iraq, outside the Kurdish-ruled region in the northeast.

When Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih visited the villages Thursday, under heavy guard, angry survivors of the atrocity denounced both the attackers—whose identity is not yet established—and the failure of government security forces to protect them. One elderly Yazidi man told Salih, “Their aim is to annihilate us, to create trouble and kill all the Yazidis because we are not Muslims.”

In Baghdad there was fingerpointing on all sides. The Bush administration, in keeping with its recent propaganda offensive, laid exclusive blame on Al

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Qaeda in Iraq, declaring, “Extremists continue to show to what lengths they will go to stop Iraq from becoming a stable and secure country.”

The Shiite-dominated government of Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki blamed Sunni extremists, without specifying Al Qaeda. Kurdish officials said the massacre was the product of the rising conflict between Arabs and Kurds for control of northern Iraq.

The Sunni vice president of Iraq, Tareq al-Hashemi, denounced both the massacre of Yazidis and the kidnapping the same day of Iraq’s deputy oil minister, Abdul Jabar al-Wagga, a Sunni, seized by 100 gunmen wearing Iraqi Army uniforms. Hashemi said both events raised the question “who was benefiting from such acts,” and noted that both occurred “while the government and its security apparatus remain silent.”

Predictably, American authorities in Baghdad seized on the massacre as an argument for continuing the US occupation. American ambassador Ryan C. Crocker and General David Petraeus, the top US commander, issued a statement condemning the bombings and declaring that the death toll “only strengthens our resolve to continue our mission against the terrorists who are plaguing the people of Iraq.” Petraeus added that the attacks reinforced his conviction that any rapid withdrawal of American troops from Iraq could produce a bloodbath.

The *Washington Post*, a leading media supporter of the Iraq war, published an editorial under the headline “21st-Century Barbarism,” which endorsed a similar argument. “U.S. troops are performing noble work in trying to protect Iraqi civilians from depredations such as Tuesday’s barbaric bomb attacks,” the newspaper argued.

Such claims stand reality on its head. The event which triggered the bloodbath in Iraq was the US invasion and the continued occupation of the country has led to the systematic destruction of the economic, social and cultural infrastructure of the country. American policy has been aimed at dominating Iraq with a policy of divide and conquer. The US colonialists have deliberately encouraged ethno-religious divisions, inevitably setting the stage for ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the most horrific kind.

The events in Qataniyah and Jazeera are reactionary and abhorrent. They are dwarfed, however, by the death and damage inflicted by US imperialism.

According to the estimate produced last year by a research team from Johns Hopkins University, the death toll in Iraq produced by just over three years of US invasion and occupation had already reached 655,000 people. That is a death toll on the scale of Qataniyah and Jazeera ***every single day*** that the United States has been in control of Iraq.

This is the “noble work” which the Bush administration and American imperialism are carrying out against the people of Iraq, victims of a crime of monstrous and historic proportions.

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