

US carries out massive bombing on outskirts of Baghdad

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The US military unleashed a huge bombardment on the Arab Jubour district just 15 kilometres south-east of Baghdad on Thursday. In the space of 10 minutes, B-1 bombers and F-16 fighters pounded 47 targets with 47,500 pounds of high explosive bombs. A military spokesman, Major Alayne Conway, boasted that the operation “was one of the largest air strikes since the onset of the war”. The blasts were seen, heard and felt in the suburbs of Iraq’s capital.

The strikes hit alleged safe houses and weapons caches of the insurgent organisation Al Qaeda in Iraq, as well as abandoned vehicles and sections of road that were believed to be planted with IEDs (improvised explosive devices). A factor in the aerial blitz was the death of six US troops and an Iraqi interpreter on Wednesday in Diyala province, when an explosion tore through a booby-trapped house. The air strikes, according to Colonel Terry Ferrell, were to “clear the ground of known targets and threats” ahead of a sweep through the area by hundreds of US and Iraqi government troops over the following hours.

US army sergeant Randal Maynard told the *Washington Post*: “These were some big IEDs buried in the ground. Had the soldiers drove up on these IEDs, it could have caused six to eight deaths.”

The US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, has ordered increasing use of air strikes in order to meet the Bush administration’s desperate demands for reduced US casualties and the suppression of the ongoing insurgency. In 2007, there were at least 1,119 air strikes, according to the US Air Force, compared with 229 the previous year.

American spokesmen have claimed that four targets were not hit due to concerns over civilian casualties. As in Afghanistan, however, the reliance on air power against guerillas embedded within the Iraqi civilian

population leads to the slaughter of non-combatants. In the Arab Jubour area, three women and two children were killed by an air strike 10 days ago, according to a source cited by the *New York Times* on Friday.

The US military has not stated how many casualties resulted from Thursday’s bombardment. A local Sunni militiaman collaborating with the occupation told Agence France Presse (AFP) that at least 21 Al Qaeda in Iraq fighters were killed, including their leader, named Walid Khudair. US and government troops detained 12 men during the ensuing ground operation.

The attack on Arab Jubour is part of a broader offensive in the first weeks of 2008 called Phantom Phoenix. Its objective is to root out and kill insurgents in predominantly Sunni Arab areas of the country who have refused to cease fighting and join so-called “Awakening Councils” and “concerned citizen groups”. During 2007, as many as 80,000 former insurgents and insurgent sympathisers changed sides and enlisted in US-backed Sunni-dominated militias.

The motive of the new militia leadership—most of whom are former military officers and tribal leaders with links to the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein—has been to secure US military and political backing in their power struggle with Islamic fundamentalist tendencies like Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Shiite parties that dominate the US-backed government in Baghdad.

The largest operations are taking place in districts of Diyala province to the north east of Baghdad, and further north in regions near the cities of Tikrit, Kirkuk and Mosul. In all areas, the US military is receiving assistance from sections of the Sunni establishment to hunt down opponents.

The towns, villages and hamlets of Arab Jubour have been a major battleground between the US occupation

and insurgents, and in the civil war between rival Sunni factions. The area, which had a pre-war population of more than 100,000, is now a wasteland of bombed-out buildings, dried-up channels and abandoned fields. It was once renowned for its intricate and centuries-old irrigation systems which fed off the Tigris River and supplied productive date and fruit orchards. Its beauty, rural charm and proximity to Baghdad made it a desirable location for the homes of better-off Iraqis, including officials of the Baathist government and military officers.

Following the US invasion, it was a logical base of operations for Iraqi guerillas. It was close to the capital and the population was sympathetic to the resistance. The terrain both provided ample hide-outs and made operations by US armoured vehicles difficult.

Just 12 months ago, on January 18, 2007, the then US commander in the area, Lieutenant Colonel Mark Odom, told CBS News: “We’re up against a Sunni-based insurgency that is dissatisfied with the Iraqi government. They think the government does not support them with basic services like electricity, food and fuel vouchers. They view the Iraqi government as essentially supporting Shiite militias. Ninety to 100 percent of the area’s residents either actively or passively support the insurgency. Clearly, many of them have been in the military, based on the engagements we have had. Their tactics, their employment of indirect fire systems, indicates something beyond just paramilitary training.”

In the latter part of last year, a faction of the Arab Jubour insurgency struck a deal with the US military in order to dislodge the Islamist organisations—which are universally labelled Al Qaeda regardless of their political affiliations—that had taken control of the area and driven out the Baathist supporters. The US brokered similar deals with Baathist-linked insurgents in Diyala who had been largely defeated by their rivals in Baqubah and other towns of the province.

The most striking aspect of the US offensives against Al Qaeda in Iraq is that Petraeus is not seeking to establish the authority of the Iraqi government in the predominantly Sunni areas being targeted. Instead, these regions are being handed over as virtual fiefdoms to Sunni militias.

One of the recruits to the American-backed “concerned citizens’ groups” near Arab Jubour told

the *New York Times* on Friday: “We clashed with Al Qaeda two weeks ago and with American help we were able to regain control of two towns. After we took control of these towns, we held a celebration and we were able to bring back 150 out of 200 families that had been displaced by Al Qaeda.”

A great deal is said in the US media about the ruthlessness of Islamist insurgent groups in dealing with opponents, but the savage methods employed by the US military and the anti-democratic character of their new Sunni allies are allowed to pass without comment.



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