

US military admits to a dozen civilian deaths in Iraq

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The US military confirmed Tuesday that soldiers shot dead at least three Iraqi civilians in their beds Monday night north of Baghdad. The admission comes just a day after military officials acknowledged that nine civilians were killed in an Army air raid south of the capital on February 2.

The incidents, which were only acknowledged by the military after inquiries from the media, highlight the ongoing brutality of the US occupation and its reliance on indiscriminate firepower.

On Saturday, witnesses in Iskandariya said the air raid came after a mortar attack on a US convoy at a checkpoint manned by US-backed Sunni fighters, members of the so-called Awakening Councils. Calling the air raid “the deadliest case of mistaken identity since November,” the Associated Press reported that the Army retaliated to the hostile fire by calling in strikes on a nearby home where Awakening Council fighters had sought cover. Helicopters bombarded the house, killing eight adults and a child, and wounding three others, including two children.

The area has been subjected to massive US air strikes since the beginning of the year, with the initiation of operation Phantom Phoenix. Tens of thousands of pounds of bombs have been dropped on Baghdad suburbs and other areas inhabited mainly by Sunnis who have refused to join the Awakening Councils.

The militias were formed primarily out of the desire of former Baathist military and tribal leaders to challenge Shiite dominance in the government by securing US backing.

In November, US troops killed dozens of Awakening Council members north of Baghdad, but officials insisted simply that the dead were suspected militants who were engaged because they were within “the target area” of operations. More militia members have been

killed in similar circumstances in the months since.

As with so many US assaults, the attacks on the Awakening Councils reveal that the difference between civilians and “suspected militants”—or the catch-all “suspected Al Qaeda”—is frequently a matter of taxonomic convenience to US command.

The latest instance has stoked anxiety among Sunni leaders that US atrocities will cause former insurgents who enlisted the Awakening Councils over the past year to defect. Reflecting the unsound and shallow character of the Sunni-US alliance and the Iraqi government itself, Sunni government official Salman al-Jumaili commented to the Associated Press, “Al Qaeda could exploit such mistrust in order to win back some Awakening Council members ... any attempt to hurt them, even if it is by mistake, could endanger the political process in the country.”

The military issued a potted statement following the attack that steered clear of any acceptance of blame. “We offer our condolences to the families of those who were killed in this incident and we mourn the loss of innocent civilian life,” US navy lieutenant Patrick Evans, acting as a military spokesman, told the press Monday.

Council fighter Abu Abeer, who witnessed the attack, told the AP that helicopters were targeting anyone near the house. “It was a crime and it shows the Americans’ disrespect for Iraqi blood,” he said. “The US apology will not bring the dead people back to life.”

On Monday night in Adwar, a predominantly Sunni village 10 miles south of Tikrit, US soldiers stormed a one-room house and killed several members of a family. Iraqi police said that while the US military reported three dead, two young children were also shot and one died of her wounds on Tuesday.

Witnesses say the raid was unprovoked. According to

a cousin of the victims, soldiers burst in and opened fire on the unarmed residents immediately. The dead included a 40-year-old woman, her 55-year-old husband, and their teenage son, who was a member of the local Awakening Council.

One surviving family member, a 16-year-old girl, told reporters that when US troops forced their way into the home, their interpreter tried to stop them from killing her parents, and put himself between the soldiers and a five-year-old and six-year-old.

In contrast, US military officials, in typical fashion, insisted that soldiers came under fire and killed two suspected terrorists in self-defense. Absurdly, officials claimed in an email sent to the AP that the military did not know who shot the woman or the children. Contradictorily, officials also implied that militants used the civilians as human shields and the troops had no choice but to use force.

Elsewhere in Iraq Monday, the US touted the killing of 15 “suspected militants” in raids northeast of Baghdad. According to the official press statements, the dead were targeted by US forces at a “possible bed-down location” for Al Qaeda. Over the weekend at least 11 others were killed in similar raids and 64 were detained.

While US officials insist that the addition of 30,000 troops in 2007 resulted in a drop in civilian and troop casualties, reliance on indiscriminate force suggests that the deaths of innocents are not being reported consistently, and that the military may be classifying civilians as militants in their public statements.

Receiving even less media attention is the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of civilians killed by US and NATO forces in Afghanistan doubled over 2007, largely due to air strikes. Last year, US-led forces dropped about a million pounds of bombs in the country.

In a report published February 5, Marc Garlasco of Human Rights Watch told the *Washington Times* that from 2006 through 2007, “You see a jump from some 20,000 pounds of bombs dropped per month to some 80,000 to 100,000 pounds dropped.”

The paper said a similar increase was seen in Iraq. In 2006, US forces dropped 62,000 pounds of bombs during air strikes. In early 2007, the US was dropping 10,000 to 15,000 pounds per month. In the latter half of the year, the US was bombarding Iraq with 71,000

pounds of explosives per month.

The result for both countries is a humanitarian disaster, vastly downplayed by the media and denied by US military and political leaders. A number of studies have put the civilian death toll in Iraq in the hundreds of thousands or more than a million, and polls by both the British firm ORB and the BBC found roughly one in five households had lost family members to war violence. While the Iraq Health Ministry has recently estimated civilian war dead at 155,000, the Iraq Ministry of Human Rights reported February 4 that there were at least 1.5 million widows registered with the government, many of whom lost their husbands to war-related violence.



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