

Washington's concerns grow amid Iraqi anger over US raid

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Protests in Iraq over Sunday's US special forces raid in Kut, the capital of the predominantly Shiite Wasit province, will only add to the mounting concerns in the Obama administration and American military over the country's ongoing instability.

The incident itself demonstrated the murderous methods that US forces in Iraq continue to use to suppress even the suggestion of organised resistance to the American occupation. As in thousands of previous cases, American troops, acting on vague and unsubstantiated suspicions, smashed their way into a house in the dead of night. The purported aim of the operation was to detain an alleged financier of a Shiite "special group"—an insurgent group allegedly armed and financed by the Iranian government. The home actually belonged to a local police captain and tribal leader, Muamar Abdul Munin.

Munin's brother Khalid, also a police officer, rushed from an adjoining home, most likely fearing his sibling was in danger. As he approached the scene carrying a weapon, he was gunned down by American troops and died. His wife, who had accompanied him, was killed by a bullet to the head. Munin's house was ransacked, personal items taken and Munin, together with another of his brothers, and four other men, was bound, hooded and flown by helicopter to a US-run detention facility. Munin told Reuters that an interrogator repeatedly demanded to know about his links with Iran.

The killings and detentions provoked outrage in Kut, which at one time was a major support base of the anti-occupation Shiite Sadrist movement but has been relatively quiescent since cleric Moqtada al-Sadr called for an end to resistance. The opposition and resentment toward the US takeover of the country has not gone away, however.

Within hours of the raid, hundreds of relatives and friends

of Munin's family, including a number of police officers, held a demonstration outside the offices of the Wasit provincial government. They denounced the occupation and demanded the immediate release of the detained men. The recently re-elected Wasit governor, anxious to defuse a potential trigger for wider unrest, joined the condemnations and demanded that the Iraqi government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki intervene.

Maliki, equally concerned to prevent a social explosion in one of the south's major cities, made a public statement on national television on Sunday evening. He condemned the raid as a violation of the US-Iraq security agreement that came into effect on January 1 and which formally bars American forces from conducting operations without Iraqi approval. On the basis of the agreement, he demanded that the US military "hand over those responsible for this crime to the courts".

Last November, Maliki claimed that the security agreement guaranteed that the occupation was coming to an end. "No detainees anymore, no detention centres anymore, or American prisons for Iraqis, no searches or raids of buildings or houses, until there is an Iraqi judicial warrant and is fully coordinated with the Iraqi government," he said at the time.

In Sunday's case, the US military apparently only obtained the approval of two local Iraqi military commanders but did not obtain a warrant or inform the Baghdad government about the raid. Iraqi police have since arrested the two officials who signed off on the American operation.

Following Maliki's broadcast, Munin and the five other detainees were released and a press conference was held Sunday night during which US officers apologised for the killings. The apology has not abated the anger, however, or the demands that American troops be brought to trial.

Munin told Reuters: “We are a peaceful family and I’m still in shock at how they suddenly raided our house, vandalised everything and killed my brother and his wife. We have started pressing charges against the US forces. We want the guilty to be brought to justice.”

A Sadrist parliamentary representative, Ahmed al-Masoudi, declared: “We must fulfill the articles of the pact by sending the personnel who committed this crime to Iraqi courts to prosecute them. The credibility of the US and Iraq’s so-called sovereignty are now facing a real test.”

Maliki’s intervention was aimed at containing popular anger against the occupation and shoring up his government. If the American forces are not punished, it will provide more fuel for his Shiite political opponents to condemn his government and the Da’wa Party as nothing more than US puppets. There is already fierce rivalry between competing Shiite parties in the south, which will only intensify in the lead-up to federal elections due in December.

In Washington, the potential for political instability in the Shiite south—which contains the bulk of Iraq’s oil reserves—can only be a source of concern. There is already a growing discussion that it was decidedly premature to conclude last year that the Bush administration’s “surge” in 2007 had been successful, allowing for a substantial reduction of US troops in the country.

In reality, the outcome of the surge was a tenuous political arrangement that left Iraq essentially partitioned into rival Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish spheres—each controlled by factions of the elite that derive wealth and power by cooperating with the US.

This house of cards is now crumbling. Sunni-based factions in western and central Iraq are threatening a revolt against the Maliki government over its refusal to grant them greater control over Sunni areas and its insistence that the Sunni Awakening Council militias disband and disarm. Large numbers of the Awakening fighters could rejoin the anti-US resistance if they are stripped of the minimal privileges they gained helping the US military to establish a shaky stability in these areas.

This month there has already been a series of sectarian bombings that could signal a return to the open Sunni-Shiite communal violence that cost tens of thousands of lives in 2006 and 2007.

In the north, tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdish nationalist parties who rule the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are reaching a fever-pitch over the Kurdish bid to control the province of Kirkuk, the other main oil-producing region.

The UN has now formally recommended that a referendum should not be held in Kirkuk or other disputed areas claimed by the KRG as it could ignite a civil war between the majority Kurdish population and the large Arab and Turkomen minorities.

The April 25 editorial of the English-language *Kurdish Globe* denounced the UN as serving Arab nationalism and called on the Kurdish leadership to act unilaterally to ensure Kirkuk was brought under KRG rule. Government and Kurdish troops are already facing off in the province.

In an indication of the seriousness with which the US military takes the threat, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen held meetings with senior Kurdish leaders on Saturday—at the same time as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton was meeting with Maliki in Baghdad.

The conclusion being drawn by the Obama administration and the Pentagon is that the timetable for the withdrawal of the bulk of the US forces in Iraq must be extended. The *New York Times* reported on April 27 that the June 30 deadline for troops to withdraw from Iraq’s cities is being circumvented by exempting major US bases that are on the outskirts of urban centres—such as the 20,000-strong garrison at the Camp Victory base in western Baghdad.

Operating from fortified bases, the American military will still be able to sally out to crush any outbreak of violence or unrest that threatens long-held US plans to exploit Iraq’s vast energy resources and transform it into a US base of operations in the broader region. The continued presence of large numbers of US troops and operations such as the Kut raid are the only means of suppressing the widespread popular opposition among Iraqis to these aims.



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