

Iraq: US military raid on “Iranian-backed terrorist organisation”

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US troops and their proxy Iraqi security forces killed at least five people on Friday during a raid on Ali ash Sharqi, a village near the Iranian border in Maysan province, about 265 kilometres south-east of Baghdad. Local political figures and provincial police reported that up to 10 people were killed, including several civilians. “What happened this morning was a massacre in every sense of the word,” Maysan province governor Mohammed Shia al-Sudany told Iraqi state television news.

The US military subsequently issued a provocative statement, claiming the raid had targeted a group called Kataib Hezbollah, which it described as an “Iranian-backed terrorist organisation” responsible for “attacks resulting in civilian deaths”. It claimed that the operation against the “Iranian-backed lethal aid smuggling and rocket-attack network” would disrupt the import of “rockets, explosives and other weapons” from Iran.

The incident took place amid Washington’s drive for further punitive sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program. While the US-Iraqi security forces’ offensive against alleged Kataib Hezbollah members does not appear to have been incorporated by the Obama administration and the US media into the anti-Tehran campaign, the violent raid highlights the fraught state of regional relations. Nearly seven years after the US led the illegal invasion of Iraq, the situation remains highly volatile, with border operations like that carried out in Ali ash Sharqi on Friday having the potential to trigger a major international incident.

Kataib Hezbollah is one of several armed groups that were originally loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr

but split in 2007 around the time Sadr was moving to disarm his Mahdi Army militia. The US State Department listed Kataib Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation last June, accusing the group of being “responsible for numerous violent terrorist attacks” and of having “ideological ties to Lebanese Hezbollah”. The Iranian government has denied any connection with Kataib Hezbollah, and no evidence has been provided to substantiate US allegations that the Iranian Quds Force has trained and armed the Iraqi group.

After Friday’s raid in eastern Iraq, the US military statement claimed that a joint US-Iraqi security team “was fired upon by individuals dispersed in multiple residential buildings”. Then, “members of the security team returned fire, killing individuals assessed to be enemy combatants”.

Local officials contradicted this account. Maysan councilman Maytham Lafta told the Associated Press that at least 10 “innocent people” were killed—including two women—and five others were wounded. AP reported that US forces “did not respond to multiple requests for additional information about the raid”. The incident has all the hallmarks of another US war crime in Iraq. Working amid a people deeply hostile to the foreign military presence, there have been numerous cases in which American troops have responded to an ambush by opening fire on everyone in the vicinity, including civilians.

The Ali ash Sharqi killings have again revealed the extent to which US military forces remain focussed on suppressing any resistance to the occupation of Iraq. Under the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) governing the US military presence in “sovereign”

Iraq, American troops are supposed to remain outside urban centres and all military operations are to be conducted with Iraqi government approval. Iraqi forces are meant to be primarily responsible for security. In reality, the SOFA has merely altered the form of the occupation. US military “advisors” are embedded throughout the Iraqi security forces, selecting targets and directing operations that are supported as required by massive air bombing.

According to the US military, 22 “terrorists” were arrested in Ali ash Sharqi and other neighbouring villages. In Ali al Gharbi, US troops and Iraqi forces claimed to have found “electric circuits used to detonate improvised explosive devices, several assault rifles and [other] military equipment”.

On Saturday, the day after the raid, Iraqi insurgents fired a barrage of rockets at a joint US-Iraqi base near the town of Amarah, south of Baghdad. Two Iraqi soldiers were reportedly injured and equipment was damaged. US military spokesman Major Myles Caggins said the attack appeared to be “retaliation against the Iraqi security forces”.

Violence is increasing in Iraq in the lead up to the March 7 national parliamentary election. On Friday three explosions, including one reportedly carried out by a female suicide bomber, killed at least six Shiite pilgrims outside Najaf, in southern Iraq. On Saturday night, a bomb exploded outside the Baghdad headquarters of a political group headed by prominent Sunni parliamentarian Saleh al-Mutlaq. Two people were wounded. Four other bombs exploded in Baghdad around the same time, targeting different political parties and parliamentarians.

There are mounting concerns in Washington over the perceived legitimacy of the upcoming election in the eyes of ordinary Iraqis. On February 3 an Iraqi appeals court overturned an official ban on hundreds of Sunni and secular-based candidates standing for election due to alleged Baathist connections. However this ruling has since been effectively reversed again following denunciations from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and other senior government figures. At least 160 people

are still barred from standing for election, including the proposed number two and three candidates on the Iraqiya party slate, Saleh al-Mutlaq and Dhafir al-Ani.

Iraqiya is a coalition that includes a number of Sunni and secular parties and figures such as the first US-installed prime minister, Iyad Allawi, and the current vice president Tariq al-Hashemi. It was expecting to poll well against the Shiite fundamentalist parties that have dominated the various parliaments formed under US occupation, attracting support from both Sunni voters and secular Shiites.

“The disqualifications have raised the spectre of a Sunni boycott of the elections, something that happened during the last elections in 2005,” the *New York Times* warned on Saturday. “At a minimum, the disqualifications have overshadowed an election campaign that is widely viewed as a measure of Iraq’s new democracy.”

The real concern of the *New York Times* is not the fate of Iraq’s “new democracy” but rather for the Obama administration’s military and geo-strategic plans. The carefully orchestrated March 7 election is being held under US military occupation and has nothing to do with the democratic rights of the Iraqi people. But if the process degenerates into anything comparable to last year’s Afghan presidential election debacle, there will be a significant prospect of resistance re-emerging, especially in Sunni areas. This would sabotage Washington’s strategy of focussing its military forces on the AfPak war and drawing down its troop numbers in Iraq to 50,000 by September.



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