

Raid by US troops kills Iraqi civilians

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Two weeks after President Barack Obama proclaimed the end of the US “combat mission” in Iraq, a night raid by US troops in the city of Fallujah has claimed the lives of at least eight Iraqi civilians.

Wednesday’s raid provided one more indication that the US occupation of Iraq continues and American troops are still battling to suppress Iraqi resistance. While the US military has reduced its deployment in the country, the nearly 50,000 troops that remain are prepared for and are engaged in combat, the August 31 official deadline for an end to combat operations notwithstanding.

American military officials claim that the raid was aimed at killing or capturing a leading member of Al Qaeda of Mesopotamia, an insurgent group. Those killed, they say, were insurgents who fired on the joint US-Iraqi raiding party as it approached a house where the targeted individual was believed to be.

Both residents and local officials, however, strongly dispute this account. Fallujah’s police chief Brig. Gen. Faisal al Essawi told the AFP news agency that eight civilians were killed, including two women and two children. The casualties were confirmed by a local hospital.

The *New York Times* cited Iraqi police and area residents reporting that “Four of the dead were brothers between the ages of 10 and 18.”

Iraqi police said that four US Army helicopters provided support during the 1 a.m. operation.

Local residents reported a scene of “chaos and fear as American soldiers and Iraqi security officers moved through the area in the darkness,” the *Times* reported. “They accused the Iraqis of firing indiscriminately, often at people who represented no threat.”

“I was sleeping when I was awakened by gunfire and explosions,” a resident told the *Times*. “I went out to see what was happening and they shot at me. They missed, but I went back inside and stayed there.”

Fallujah, 43 miles west of Baghdad, is located in the predominantly Sunni Anbar Province, a center of resistance to the US occupation since the 2003 invasion. In November 2004, the US military subjected Fallujah to a brutal siege, in which thousands were killed and more than half of the city’s buildings reduced to rubble. The population of 600,000 was reduced by half due to the killings and the forced exodus of those who fled the assault.

The siege involved some of the worst war crimes of the US occupation, including the summary execution of prisoners and the use of white phosphorus shells to burn insurgents and unarmed civilians alive.

This week’s murderous raid has reawakened the deep-seated rage of the local population over the suffering inflicted by the US occupation forces.

“The security situation in Fallujah may deteriorate because of what happened today,” Abdulfattah Izghear, a city council member, told the *Washington Post*. “We asked US troops and the Iraqi government to explain this unjustified action and this naked aggression against civilians.”

On Thursday, the city’s Municipal Council declared three days of mourning for the victims of the raid. A statement issued by the council read, “The people of Fallujah denounce this terrorist operation ... motivated by the deep hatred of this city and its people.” Offices, schools and shops were shut down in protest over the killings.

Condemnation of the raid also came from officials in Ramadi, the capital city of Iraq’s western Anbar Province. The governor of the province Qassem al-Fahdawi demanded that the regime in Baghdad conduct an investigation into the raid. Officials reported that President Nouri al-Maliki has agreed to set up a commission to investigate the killings.

“All the casualties were civilians, including the owner of the house the troops targeted,” the governor

said.

The US military faced protracted resistance in Anbar Province, which it was never able to subdue by force. Relative calm was restored only by the Pentagon paying former insurgents to form tribal militias known as the Awakening Councils or Sons of Iraq, which took charge of local security.

One thing that the formal end of the US “combat mission” has meant is that responsibility for these militias has been handed over to the Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad, which has failed to pay many of the militiamen. While disarming some of the militias, the government has reneged on pledges to provide their members with government jobs or integrate them into the security forces.

Al Qaeda has increasingly targeted the leadership of the “Awakening” groups, while seeking to recruit its members into the insurgency.

“The Sahwa [Awakening Councils] are finished and we see the truth that the stability they supposedly brought was an illusion, it was never really there,” Harith al Dhari, the exiled chairman of Association of Muslim Scholars, a Sunni opposition group, told the Abu Dhabi-based daily, the *National*. “He insisted tribal leaders in the Sahwa Councils now viewed their decisions to join with the government and US as a mistake,” the paper reported. “They are like loyal slaves who get killed for that loyalty,” he said.

Unrest in the region has intensified in the context of the continuing failure of Iraq’s discredited sectarian political parties to form a new government, six months after parliamentary elections last March. The new 325-member parliament has met only once since the election, for a 20-minute session.



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