

The massacre of Iraqi Civilians: Death Mask

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What happened in the village of Isahaqi, north of Baghdad, on the Ides of March? The murk of war — the natural blur of unbuckled event, and its artificial augmentation by professional massagers — shrouds the details of the actual operation. But here is what we know.

We know that U.S. forces conducted a raid on a house in the village on March 15. We know that the Pentagon said the troops were “targeting an individual suspected of supporting foreign fighters for the al-Qaida in Iraq terror network,” when their team came under fire, and that the troops “returned fire, utilizing both air and ground assets,” as the Army Times reports. We know the Pentagon said that “only” one man, two women and one child were killed in the raid.

We know from photographic evidence that the corpses of two men, four shrouded figures (women, according to the villagers), and five children — all of them apparently under the age of five, one as young as seven months — were pulled from the rubble of the house and laid out for burial beneath the desert sky. We know that an Associated Press reporter on the scene saw the ruined house, and a photographer for Agence France-Presse took the pictures of the bodies.

We know that two Iraqi police officials, employed by the U.S.-backed Iraqi government, told Reuters that the 11 occupants of the house, including the five children, had been bound and shot in the head before the house was blown up. We know that the U.S.-backed Iraqi police said that an autopsy performed on the bodies found that “all the victims had gunshot wounds to the head.” It did not say whether they had other wounds as well. We know that a Knight-Ridder reporter later saw a preliminary police report indicating that the 11 victims had multiple wounds.

We know that Ahmed Khalaf, the brother of the house’s owner, told the AP that nine of the victims were family members and two were visitors, adding, “The killed family was not part of the resistance, they were women and children. The Americans have promised us a better life, but we get only death.”

We know from the photographs that one child, the youngest, the baby, has a gaping wound in his forehead. We can see that another child, a girl with a pink ribbon in her hair, is lying on her side with blood oozing from the back of her head. The faces of the other children are turned upward toward the sun; if they were shot, they were shot somewhere in the back, and their wounds are not evident. But we can see that their bodies, though covered with dust from the rubble, are otherwise whole; they were evidently not crushed in the collapse of the house. They died in some other fashion.

We know from the photographs that two of the children — girls, still in their pajamas — are lying with their dead eyes open. We can see that the light and tenderness that animate the eyes of every young child have vanished; nothing remains but the brute stare of nothingness into nothingness. We can see that the other three children have their eyes closed; two are limp, but the baby has one stiffened arm raised to his cheek, as if trying to ward off the blow that gashed and pulped his face so terribly.

These facts are what we know from U.S. officials, U.S.-backed Iraqi officials and reporters for Western news agencies on the scene. This is probably all we will ever know for certain about what happened in Isahaqi on March 15. The rest will remain obscured by the murk created by U.S. military spokesmen, who apparently are not telling the truth about the body count of the raid, and by the unavoidable confusion that attends the villagers' description of a surprise attack in the middle of the night. But beyond this cloud of unknowing, there are a few other facts relevant to the case that can be clearly established.

For instance, we know that the soldiers who caused the deaths of these children — either by tying them up and shooting them, an unspeakable atrocity, or else “merely” by storming or bombing a house full of civilians in a night raid “with both air and ground assets” — were sent to Iraq on a demonstrably false mission to “disarm” weapons that did not exist and take revenge for Sept. 11 on people who had nothing to do with the attack. And we now know that President George W. Bush was given detailed reports before the invasion that showed conclusively that the intelligence did not support the public case he was making for war, as the National Journal reports.

We know that three years ago this week, Bush nevertheless gave the order to begin the unprovoked, unjust and unnecessary invasion of Iraq. He hasn't fired a single shot, tortured any prisoners, beheaded any civilians or planted any bombs. Yet every single atrocity of the war, on both sides, is the direct result of the decision he made three years ago. Nothing he says can change this fact. Nothing he does, or causes to be done, for good or ill, can wash the blood of these children — and the tens of thousands of other innocent civilians killed in the war — from his hands.

And anyone who knows these facts, who sees these facts, and fails to cry out against them, if only in their own heart, will be forever tainted by this same blood.

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