

# Iraqi air strike kills dozens of civilians, lawmakers say

The Arab Weekly staff

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Iraq's parliament speaker said he was holding the Iraqi government responsible for an air strike that killed and wounded "dozens" of civilians in the Islamic State-held town of Qaim, near the Syrian border.

"The air strike hit unarmed civilians in shopping centres in Qaim and caused the killing and wounding of dozens of them," Speaker Salim al-Jabouri said in a statement, calling the incident a "crime" and saying the perpetrators should be punished.

He demanded an immediate investigation into the attack.

The government said fighter jets targeted Islamic State (ISIS) militants in two houses in Qaim but denied civilians were present. Mohammed al-Karboli, a Sunni lawmaker, however, said the jets hit three markets in Qaim during rush hour, killing and wounding 80 people. He did not cite his sources for the information.

■ Iraqi parliament speaker demands inquiry into civilian deaths in Qaim.

The ISIS-linked Amaq news agency released a nearly 2-minute-long video, which the Iraqi government claimed was a fabrication, purporting to show the aftermath of the strike. The footage shows bearded men rushing towards a scene in which dozens of cars were on fire and buildings appeared damaged. Several bodies, some burned, were seen on the ground.

The Iraqi Defence Ministry's media office said jets attacked two houses, where up to 65 ISIS fighters had gathered, based on "accurate intelligence from our sources in the region".

Qaim, 320km west of Baghdad, is among several small towns in western Anbar province still ruled by ISIS.

■ Iraqi troops pulled out from Mosul hospital after fierce battle.

Iraqi forces have pushed ISIS out of most of Anbar over the past year. Since starting an offensive on October 17th to oust ISIS from Mosul, Iraqi forces say they have recaptured almost half of eastern Mosul and are edging towards the Tigris river that divides it.

Iraqi troops, who briefly seized a Mosul hospital believed to be used as an ISIS base, were forced to withdraw from the site but established a base for tanks nearby after days of fierce back-and-forth fighting, residents said.

Coalition warplanes, at Iraq's request, struck a building inside the hospital complex from which the militants were firing machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades, the coalition said.

Iraqi military spokesmen have said little about fighting around the hospital, stressing instead gains they said were being made in other parts of eastern Mosul, including the Ilam neighbourhood a few districts north-east.

In another part of Mosul recaptured by government troops, Iraqi police fired shots in the air and threatened to whip crowds with a hose as residents tried to overrun the first distribution of aid by UN

## Iraqi airstrikes on jihadist-held zone

Iraqi air force says strikes targeted Islamic State jihadists. Civilians also reported killed



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agencies inside the city.

The United Nations scrambled to find enough land to shelter those displaced by the fighting, Bruno Geddo, the head of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Iraq, told the Associated Press. About 82,000 people have fled the city since the offensive began, Geddo said.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was harming the recovery efforts of the country's Yazidi minority, which was targeted by ISIS.

HRW said restrictions imposed by the KRG on the Yazidis were "disproportionate to any possible security considerations [and] are

causing unnecessary harm to people's access to food, water, livelihoods and other fundamental rights".

"The KRG should be working to facilitate access to Sinjar for the hundreds of Yazidi civilians wishing to return to their homes, not adding more barriers to their recovery," HRW said.

In another development, Britain's foreign intelligence chief said ISIS was plotting attacks against the United Kingdom.

"As I speak, the highly organised external attack planning structures within Daesh (ISIS), even as they face military threat, are plotting ways to project violence against the UK and our allies without ever

having to leave Syria," MI6 Chief Alex Younger said in London.

In a newly released video, ISIS called on its followers to carry out attacks in Bahrain for being part of the international anti-ISIS coalition.

ISIS propaganda has waned as the extremists lose territory in Iraq and Syria under the onslaught of a US-led campaign. Bahrain is part of the coalition.

A senior US military official said that at least 50,000 ISIS militants have been killed by the coalition since it began operations in Iraq and Syria in late 2014.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

# Iraq's Shia militias could prove bigger test than Mosul

Stephen Kalin

Baghdad

In early June, two Iranian-backed Shia militias under the nominal control of the Iraqi government stormed into an Iraqi military airbase north of Baghdad. Driving armoured vehicles and wielding rocket launchers, they took over a building on the base.

The Iraqi commander at the base, near the town of Balad, asked the militiamen to leave but they ignored him as well as orders from the central government in Baghdad, two army officers in the Saladin Operations Command, the regional military headquarters, said.

The June standoff grounded four Iraqi F-16 fighter jets and pushed more than a dozen US contractors, who were there to help local pilots bomb Islamic State (ISIS) militants, to flee, the officers and an Iraqi military intelligence source said.

■ The Iraqi government knows it needs eventually to bring the Shia militias under greater control.

It also underscored one of the biggest challenges ahead for Iraq.

Iraq is battling ISIS for the northern city of Mosul. In that struggle, government troops are fighting alongside the country's Shia militias, as well as Kurdish and US forces.

However, the government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi knows that, even if it defeats ISIS, it needs to bring the Shia militias under greater control. Iraqi and

Western officials alike say episodes such as the one in Balad raise serious questions about Abadi's ability to do that.

The militias came together in 2014 after ISIS seized one-third of Iraq. Officially, the militias form a government-backed popular fighting group called the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), which has been instrumental in protecting Baghdad and pushing back ISIS.

The militias have also created headaches for the government. Many of them have ties to Iran and have vast military and political influence. Sunni Iraqis and human rights groups have accused some of rights violations, torture and killings.

The militias deny the charges of abuses and say they are simply battling ISIS.

At the Balad airbase in June, Iraqi Army troops dealt with the rogue fighters by walling off the section of the base they had seized. The fighters eventually agreed to leave for a local farm after the intervention of their boss, Qais al-Khazali. He leads Asaib Ahl al-Haq, one of Iraq's fiercest Shia militias.

Abadi has promised to rein in the militias. Technically, the PMF reports to the prime minister through long-time national security adviser Falah al-Fayyad. Other Hashid leaders have official positions. Spokesman Ahmed al-Assadi, for example, is a lawmaker.

But Western diplomats say money for Shia fighters is regularly dispensed through commanders, giving them *de facto* control of the purse strings, and the PMF routinely presents itself as loyal to the Iraqi people rather than the state. Fayyad's deputy, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis – many militia members see him as the PMF's real leader – is a veteran commander with long-standing ties to Iran.

Iraqi and Western officials say



Shia fighters from the Popular Mobilisation Forces sit in the back of a lorry near the village of Ayn Nasir, south of Mosul, on December 4th. (AFP)

Abadi is too weak to take on the militias directly. When he first came to power in 2014, the prime minister tried to integrate the PMF into the regular security forces but that plan quickly died.

Now he is pursuing a softer approach. In February, he issued an executive order meant to nudge militias into accepting government control. Diwan Order 91 directs the PMF to become "an independent military formation, part of the Iraqi armed forces and linked to the commander-in-chief of the armed forces... on the current model of the counterterrorism service." In November, parliament passed a law to that effect. It also calls on fighters to cut party affiliations and refrain

from practising politics.

The militias control at least half a dozen prisons, local officials, police and army sources said. One is in Jurf al-Sakhar, a town south of Baghdad that was captured by security forces and militia fighters in 2014.

A national security official said the town and surrounding area is controlled by Kataib Hezbollah, one of the most secretive of the Shia militias in the PMF. The US Treasury calls the group a terrorist organisation.

Ahmed Salmani, a lawmaker from the nearby Sunni town of Qaim, said about 2,200 people are being held there. He said he had discussed their fate, including incidents of torture, with the Defence and Inte-

rior ministries as well as Abadi.

Kataib Hezbollah spokesman Jaafar Hussaini said reports of secret prisons were "baseless and a shameless attempt to distort the image of Kataib".

Western diplomats say the PMF's ranks could be halved if Iraq defeats ISIS but they also fear a hard core could evolve into something resembling Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. That would help cement the influence Tehran has gained in Iraq.

Militia leaders themselves are split, with some suggesting they will not lay down their arms even if ISIS is defeated.

(Reuters)