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ISIL suicide truck bomb kills 47 south of Baghdad in deadliest 2016 attack

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A suicide truck bomb attack claimed by ISIL killed 47 people at a crowded checkpoint south of Baghdad on Sunday – the deadliest such attack in Iraq this year.

The massive blast completely destroyed the checkpoint manned by security forces guarding the northern entrance to Hilla, an area that had recently been spared such attacks.

“The suicide bomber used an explosives-laden truck, at a time when there was dense traffic,” said Faleh Al Radhi, the head of the security committee at Babil provincial council.

A doctor at Hilla hospital put the number of people killed by the blast at 47, including around 20 members of the security forces, and said at least 72 people were also wounded.

Mr Al Radhi and police officers confirmed the casualty toll, the heaviest from any car bomb attack in Iraq this year.

The blast went off at around 1.00pm, a time of day when vehicles are usually bumper-to-bumper, waiting to be checked by security personnel.

A witness at the scene said that there was almost nothing left of the checkpoint.

He said one distraught man was asking rescuers, survivors and journalists to help him retrieve the body of his baby child from under the mangled wreckage of a car.

“When I got to the scene, there were people whose clothes were still on fire, they were screaming,” said Hamza Kadhem, 35, a labourer who was near when the blast went off.

The doctor at Hilla hospital said at least 11 of the wounded were in a very serious condition.

Mohammed Jamal, 27, a civil servant, was sitting in traffic when the explosion ripped through the lines of vehicles.

“My car windows just shattered with the blast,” he said from the emergency ward.

“After that, I can’t remember much, I was lost in this chaos and found myself at Hilla hospital,” he said.

Karim Sahi, 35, a taxi driver, was also close to the checkpoint.

“When we heard the blast, we rushed to the scene. There were bodies everywhere, people running in all directions, some just froze there, screaming,” he said.

A March 2014 suicide bombing at the same checkpoint outside Hilla, 80 kilometres south of the capital, killed 50 people and wounded more than 150.

ISIL has not had fixed positions south of Baghdad since security forces and allied militias began their fightback against the extremist group in late 2014.

When Iraqi forces began their counteroffensive against ISIL, securing the Shiite shrine cities of Najaf and Karbala, south of Baghdad, was a priority.

The extremist group has since been losing territory in Iraq. In the most recent operation, Iraqi forces have been retaking areas west of the city of Samarra and are continuing to advance.

In the cities ISIL retains control over, internal tension appears to be on the rise and the lack of supplies is taking its toll.

Observers have warned that, as its self-proclaimed “caliphate” shrinks towards extinction, ISIL will likely revert to its old guerrilla tactics and ramp up suicide car bomb attacks on civilian targets.

“The Rafidha [a derogatory term for Shiites] must understand that the battle has just begun and that the worst is yet to come,” ISIL said as it claimed Sunday’s bombing.

The attack on Hilla checkpoint was one of the deadliest bombings since a suicide explosion killed nearly 100 people in Diyala province, north of Baghdad, in July 2015.