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Al-Qaida raids on Iraqi prisons raise fears of return to civil war

Claims that attackers were helped by guards inside Abu Ghraib, as more details emerge of audacious assault

Mona Mahmood and Peter Beaumont

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Mourners carry the coffin of a man killed during an attack on a prison in Taji.

Yousef Ali had just sat down at his home near Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison at shortly after 9pm on Sunday evening to break his Ramadan fast when he was startled by the sound of explosions from the direction of the prison. "We began to hear mortars and gunfire, followed by two car

bombs," he said. "We could tell there was a big fight inside the prison. We could see aircraft hovering above the prison and nearby areas."

A team of gunmen and suicide bombers had launched a co-ordinated assault on Abu Ghraib and Taji prisons, one of the most audacious attacks by al-Qaida in Iraq in recent memory.

Al-Qaida said more than 500 prisoners were freed and 120 Iraqi guards and Swat forces killed. Officials in Baghdad indicated a lower number of escapees, without specifying the total, and said at least 25 members of the Iraqi security forces were killed along with at least 21 prisoners and 10 militants.

Ali said he and others in the area helped to hide prisoners who had escaped. "They were hiding among the bushes but they were scared they might fall into the hands of the security forces again or fall into the hands of some other people who would hand them over to the government.

"We were so happy for the release of the prisoners. We know that the majority of them are Sunni and innocent. The whole operation reminded us of the Iraqi resistance in 2004 and 2005, when it was so powerful. We thought we'd never see such operations any more but now we are very hopeful."

As more details emerged of the attack, from in a statement from the al-Qaida-affiliated Islamic State of Iraq and from sources in Baghdad, some observers warned that the latest escalation of violence brought closer again the threat of Iraq descending into a state of civil war.

There were claims that the attackers were helped by guards inside Abu Ghraib, the prison that became notorious during the Iraq war for US military abuses, now renamed Baghdad Central.

The interior minister, Wissam al-Firaiji, said the attackers had been well armed. "The attack against Taji jail alone was carried out by nine suicide bombers and three car bombs driven by suicide bombers," he said. "The attackers also lobbed more than 100 mortar shells."

Saad al-Muttalibi, a Baghdad politician and member of Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, told The Guardian: "The people who escaped were very dangerous. Some of them were terrorists who had confessed their crimes and were awaiting execution, others were detainees who had been transferred to Iraqi control from American custody when US forces left.

"This was a big failure by Iraq's security forces and the initial report by the crisis cell dealing with this incident indicates that some of the guards co-operated with the attack. Telephone and other communication equipment was also found on some of the dead attackers inside the prison."

The attack was claimed on Tuesday by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, formed this year through a merger of al-Qaida's affiliates in Syria and Iraq.

It said the attacks came exactly a year after the leader of al-Qaida's Iraqi branch, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, launched Breaking the Walls, a campaign that made freeing its imprisoned members a top priority.

It said it had managed to seize routes leading to the two prisons and hold them while suicide bombers attacked the gates to allow other militants to enter.

"In response to the call of the mujahid [holy warrior] Sheikh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to seal the blessed plan of Breaking the Walls ... the mujahideen brigades set off after months of preparation and planning to target two of the biggest prisons of the Safavid government," it said in a statement posted on militant forums.

Safavid is a reference to the dynasty that ruled Iran from the 16th to 18th centuries, and is used by hardline Sunnis as a derogatory term for Shia Muslims.

The designation of many prisoners held under terrorism legislation in Iraq has been a source of intense friction between Shias and Sunnis, with the latter claiming that many from their branch of Islam have been unfairly jailed or charged with terrorism offences.

For their part, some Shia politicians have complained that too little is being done to target those suspected of affiliation with al-Qaida, including MPs they accuse of hiding behind parliamentary immunity.

The sectarian death toll has been rising in recent months, with almost 700 killed in militant attacks so far in July, according to the violence-monitoring group Iraq Body Count.

Sunni Islamist militants have been regaining momentum in their insurgency against the Shia-led government, which came to power after the US invasion to oust Saddam Hussein. According to the al-Qaida affiliate it had managed to seize routes leading to the two prisons and hold them while suicide bombers attacked the gates to allow other militants to enter.

Tensions have been inflamed by the civil war in Syria, which has drawn in Shia and Sunni fighters from Iraq and beyond to fight against each other.

A senior Iraqi security official told Reuters that security forces had received information that some of the most high-profile al-Qaida operatives who had escaped on Sunday were on their way to Syria.

The official said border controls had been tightened. "We are co-operating with the Ministry of Justice to get full descriptions and records of the fugitives to help recapture them and bring them back to prison," he said.

The violence has raised fears of a return to full-blown conflict in Iraq, where ethnic Kurds, Shias and Sunnis have yet to find a stable way of sharing power.

Muttalibi, the Baghdad politician, said he feared for Iraq's immediate future, warning of the risk of a return to civil war or a military coup if a way could not be found to defuse the escalating strife.