

Article from a WSJ reporter who visited last week.

The LT in this article dropped the first attacker he got a bead on, we brought in aircraft and the attack on us ended abruptly.

Wall Street Journal April 16, 2007 Pg. 6

Violence Moves Beyond Baghdad Once-Peaceful Towns Succumb to Strife After Security Push in Capital

-- By Philip Shishkin

HASWAH, Iraq -- As a U.S. and Iraqi security push gained steam in the capital, trouble came to this relatively peaceful town near the Euphrates River last month, and its mosques paid the price.

The attacks on Shiite and Sunni Muslim places of worship here point to the challenges of the new U.S.-backed security plan and show how sectarian strife is tainting even those areas that have so far avoided the carnage of Baghdad. They also show how quickly U.S. troops can become the targets when fighting between the sects erupts.

Nestled amid the fertile farmlands of the Euphrates 30 miles south of the Iraqi capital, Haswah and its close neighbor Iskandariyah straddle a sectarian fault line. To the west and immediate north lie Sunni-dominated areas, while the Shiite heartland begins just to the south of the twin municipalities.

While Sunni insurgents have had the run of the surrounding farmlands for years and Shiite militants roamed free in a nearby town, Haswah and Iskandariyah -- half Sunni and half Shiite -- were largely spared serious sectarian problems. "My family has lived here for 20 generations and I've never seen anything like it," says Sabah al-Khafaji, a prominent Haswah Shiite sheik who runs a local car factory.

Then the mosque attacks began, shattering the calm of some 200,000 residents. The two towns -- one merging into the other -- succumbed to the violence that has been closing in on them from all directions. That is at least in part because of the new U.S.-led security crackdown in Baghdad, according to U.S. and Iraqi officials. It has forced some of the militants -- both Sunni and Shia -- to flee the capital and stir up trouble in other places where they can operate undisturbed.

The clashes here are part of a broader struggle for influence and territory between Sunni and Shiite militants. "They are trying to gain as much ground as they can," says Lt. Col. Robert Balcavage, who is in charge of the U.S. troops stationed here.

It all began March 13 with an event that at first appeared inconspicuous. A small, abandoned Sunni mosque was vandalized and damaged. Eleven days later, a truck carrying explosives covered with shoes pulled up to a Shiite shrine with a tall green-domed minaret. The suicide bombing killed 10 people, obliterated the squat prayer hall and shaved off half of the onion dome, scattering shoes everywhere. The next day, shots were fired at a funeral procession for the attack's victims.

The destruction of a historic Shiite shrine in Samarra early last year sparked the current sectarian conflict and tit-for-tat violence, and U.S. troops in the area went on high alert to prevent retaliatory attacks. Responsibility for guarding the Sunni mosques ultimately lay with the local police force, which is dominated by Shiite Muslims. The police set up a perimeter around several places of worship, while U.S. troops kept watch from farther away.

Shiite militants managed to penetrate the police cordons and laid bombs at three Sunni mosques in Haswah and Iskandariyah, inflicting damage, but no casualties. The Sunni mosque across the street from the destroyed Shiite shrine lost its minaret to an explosive charge. U.S. officers here suspect the bombers could have succeeded only with the complicity of the Iraqi police. "If I catch any of you [providing help], you are going to jail," Col. Balcavage recalls telling Iraqi cops in the aftermath. "They realized their heads are on the chopping block and that their cities are going to burn if they didn't do something."

By that point, the violence had spilled over into a street battle in Iskandariyah, where a band of Shiite gunmen based out of a nearby shrine laid siege to a Sunni mosque down the street. Sunni fighters were shooting at the attackers from inside. When a U.S. patrol rolled into the area, an announcement went out from the loudspeaker mounted on the minaret of the Sunni mosque: Americans are in the area, attack them, recalls First Lt. Joshua Rongitsch, who led eight of his men into the fight. The company's Iraqi interpreter lingered long enough to translate the announcement, and then ran away.

The Sunni and Shia fighters struck a temporary truce and turned their weapons -- including machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades -- against the Americans instead. "Both groups directed their fire against us, something they both could agree on," Lt. Rongitsch recalls. "We rolled up in the middle of a sectarian fight." An Apache attack helicopter soon fired on the minaret of the Sunni mosque from where heavy fire was aimed at the soldiers.

While U.S. officers and local residents blame some of the violence on the out-of-town extremists recently pushed out of Baghdad, the sectarian tensions around Haswah and Iskandariyah have been building for some time. A few months ago, Sunni insurgents expelled Shiite families from the nearby farmland. Earlier this year, several abandoned Shiite houses were burnt, apparently to make the displacement permanent. From the palm groves and fields under their control, Sunni insurgents routinely fire mortars at the Shiite neighborhoods of Haswah and Iskandariyah and launch hit-and-run attacks against police checkpoints.

Last week, Shiite gunmen started retaliating. Standing next to a destroyed cowshed, Sunni farmer Bakir Ahmed Hassan says his family's house came under fire at night from a large group of men a hundred yards away while the extended family huddled inside. "I have a feeling this is a revenge attack," First Lt. Derek Oberg told the farmers on a recent visit. In Haswah itself, residents say, the atmosphere has quickly grown tenser. Last month, a Sunni driving a truck with canisters of cooking gas was stopped in the middle of the road, pulled out of his truck and shot in the head, according to his family -- a typical pattern of sectarian killings. U.S. officers say the numbers of those murdered like this have held steady at two a day.

The Shiite shrine that was destroyed by a car bomb is being quickly rebuilt. On a recent day, a dozen workers laid bricks around exposed rebar. A large portrait of Moqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shiite cleric who leads a powerful militia, was stuck into a sand mound in front of the mosque. The rhetoric emanating from mosques -- both Shia and Sunni -- has become increasingly hostile. "These are houses of God," says Mr. Khafaji, the Shiite sheik. "But instead of preaching peace and love, they've been preaching violence and hatred."

Classification: UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

For more information visit www.titus.com

Classification: UNCLASSIFIED

Caveats: NONE