

## **Death Stalks the Road to Latifiya**

A town south of Baghdad has recently become home to a particularly intolerant version of Sunni radicalism.

Sheikh Hassan al-Falah, a 36-year old follower of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, removes the turban that marks him out as a Shia cleric every time he travels from Baghdad to the Shia holy city of Najaf.

He does so because the road passes through Latifiya – a town south of Baghdad that in recent months has become home to a particularly intolerant version of radical Sunni Islam.

For nearly a year after the United States-led invasion of Iraq, Latifiya, 40 km from the capital, was considered a quiet town.

But it has now gained notoriety as the place where two French journalists were abducted, where an assassination attempt on Iraqi politician Ahmed Chalabi was staged, and from which Shia residents are fleeing for their lives.

In early September, at least two Shia clerics – Sheikh Basher al-Jazaeri of the radical Sadrist movement and Sheikh Kareem al-Bahadlei – were killed in separate incidents.

Latifiya and the two nearby towns of Mahmoudiya and Yousifiya, located on highways to the southern Shia communities, have been dubbed the “Death Triangle” or “Bermuda Triangle” for a series of attacks that have been staged there.

The area is dominated by Sunni tribes including the Jenabat, Zobaa, Karagoli al-Gareer and Dulaimi, many of them originally from Anbar province to the north-east, where the insurgent hotbeds of Fallujah and Ramadi are located.

According to residents, many of these tribes came to this formerly rural area in the Eighties, encouraged by Saddam Hussein's policy of settling Sunnis on highways leading out of Baghdad and in other strategically sensitive areas.

Saddam is said to have rewarded the migrants with money and cars, and he built a highway linking Fallujah and Latifiya to bypass Baghdad traffic.

Only in recent months has the area become a launch-pad for radical Sunni groups.

The wreckage of the Shia shrine of Sayed Faraj, visible on the highway north, attest to the Sunni puritanism that has sprung up in the region.

Locals blame the attacks on a group of armed men known as “the Opel group” – a reference to the cars they favour for launching ambushes – and they claim police are unable to protect them properly.

Although policemen are still present in town, they do not venture out from their station, which lies concealed behind towering concrete blast walls.

As a result, many Shia residents have decided to leave Latifiya out of fear.

"I am afraid - I intend to leave my house." said Shia minibus driver Ramadan al-Yassini, 47, citing the murder of a Shia school headmaster as grounds for leaving.

Shortly after speaking to IWPR, he relocated to the nearby city of Karbala, to which his brother had already moved after receiving a death threat from Sunnis. "He had done nothing - it was just because he was a Shia," said Yassini.

Shia organisations have called on the government to take steps to restore security in Latifiya.

On September 4, Iraqi police and National Guards units backed by United States troops raided the town. They claim to have arrested nearly 500 people and seized large caches of weapons.

Twelve policemen were killed during the raid.

An insurgent called Abu Tahir told IWPR that his men turned the tables on the government forces, using a suicide car bomb before ambushing them with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

"The mujahideen holy warriors lost eight martyrs," he said. "They arrested just 80 men, and most of them were civilians."

He denied that his fellow fighters targeted Shia leaders, blaming the attacks on "groups who wish to create sectarian strife".

Husein Ali, Imad al-Shara and Salaam Jihad are IWPR trainees.

**Location:** [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)  
[Iraq](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/death-stalks-road-latifiya>