

Beat: Miscellaneous

Heavily armed gunmen kill 57 Syrian, Iraqi soldiers in western Iraq

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USPA News - Nearly 50 Syrian soldiers were killed Monday when they were ambushed by heavily armed gunmen in western Iraq, defense officials said, making it the deadliest spillover of violence into Iraq since the Syrian conflict began. Nine Iraqi soldiers were also killed.

The ambush happened on Monday afternoon when a group of unidentified men attacked an Iraqi convoy which was escorting a transport bus near the city of Rutba in Al Anbar Governorate. The bus was transporting dozens of Syrian soldiers from the capital Baghdad to the Al Waleed border crossing. The large group of Syrian troops, belonging to the regime of embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, had fled into Iraq after heavy fighting with rebels who took control of the al-Yaroubiyah border area on the Syrian side. Four soldiers were treated at a north Iraq hospital and later taken to Baghdad where preparations were made to hand them back to Syrian authorities. Officials at Iraq's Defense Ministry said in a statement early Tuesday that 57 people were killed in the ambush, which involved improvised explosive devices (IEDs), gunfire, and rocket-propelled grenades. Among those killed were 9 Iraqi soldiers and 48 Syrian soldiers, but it was not known if any gunmen were killed or captured. In addition to the fatalities, the defense ministry said one Iraqi soldier and 10 Syrian soldiers were injured, but their conditions were not immediately released. "This attack is a blatant assault on Iraq's sovereignty, territory, and dignity and is a flagrant violation of human rights," a defense spokesperson said. "We strongly warn all parties on the Syrian side against moving their armed struggle into Iraq or violating Iraq's borders. [Iraq] will reply firmly and strongly with all means available against those who try to violate the borders and security of Iraq." The ministry described the attackers as belonging to a "terrorist group" that crossed into Iraq from Syria, but no other details were immediately available. No group claimed responsibility for the attack, which is the worst spillover of violence into Iraq since the Syrian conflict began. Last week, the United Nations (UN) and the League of Arab States expressed "deep frustration" over the continuing Syrian crisis, calling on the international community to increase their efforts to establish a peace process in the country. According to the UN, up to 70,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began in March 2011 and more than 900,000 people have fled to neighboring countries. In addition, 2 million have been internally displaced and over 4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

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