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Marine in Iraq Suspended Over Coins Quoting Gospel

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By Amit R. Paley
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BAGHDAD, May 29 -- The [U.S. military](#) suspended a Marine on Thursday for distributing coins quoting the Gospel to Sunni Muslims, an incident that has enraged Iraqis who view it as the latest example of American disrespect for Islam.

The Marine, stationed in the western city of Fallujah, handed out silver-colored coins this week that said in Arabic: "Where will you spend eternity? (John 3:36)." The other side read: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16)."

"We are sorry for this behavior," said Mike Isho, a U.S. military spokesman in Anbar province, which includes Fallujah. He said the Marine, whom he did not identify, distributed only a few of the coins and that the episode was under investigation.

"This incident doesn't represent the morals of the Marines," he said.

Mohammed Amin Abdel-Hadi, the head of the Sunni Endowment in Fallujah, an institution responsible for overseeing the sect's mosques, criticized U.S. troops, whom many in the city view as occupiers, for acting like Christian missionaries. He said the coins were part of a pattern of insensitivity toward Muslims, citing the outcry this month over a U.S. sniper in Baghdad who used a Koran, Islam's holiest book, as a target for practice.

"We demand the Americans leave us alone and stop creating religious controversies," Hadi said. "First, they shot the Koran, and now they come to proselytize inside Fallujah."

Mohammed Jassim al-Dulaimi, 43, said a Marine forced one of the coins into his hand Tuesday morning as he passed through a checkpoint at the western entrance to Fallujah. He said he was shocked when he read it.

"The claims that the occupation is a Crusader War make sense now," Dulaimi said.

Police were placed on high alert and deployed around Fallujah's mosques. Officials feared violence after Friday prayers, when imams are expected to rail against the distribution of the coins and the shooting of the Koran, said police Capt. Ahmed al-Jumaili. He added that U.S. troops had reduced their presence on the streets of the city.

A U.S. statement referred to the coin incident as "an allegation" and said "appropriate action" would be taken if the claim was substantiated.

"Regulations prohibit members of the coalition force from proselytizing any religion, faith or practices," said Col. Bill Buckner, a U.S. military spokesman in Baghdad. "Our troops are trained on those guidelines before they deploy."

The controversy over the coins, which was first reported by McClatchy Newspapers, came as a suicide bomber killed at least 16 people in front of a police station in northern Iraq.

Officials said the bomber detonated explosives among a cluster of poor young men who had been camped out for days to apply for jobs as police officers in Sinjar, a remote village near the Syrian border where hundreds of people were killed last summer in the deadliest suicide attack of the war.

The police had been ordering the men to leave for several days, shooting in the air and blaring on loudspeakers that there were no jobs, residents said. The bomber, a man in his twenties wearing a police uniform, walked into the crowd at 11 a.m., raised his left hand and blew himself up, according to witnesses.

Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani said the Sinjar police chief, Awad al-Sorchi, would be removed from his position and investigated by a panel reviewing the attack, according to [Abdul Karim Khalaf](#), a ministry spokesman.

In other violence, a suicide bomber killed two police officers and wounded 10 other people in the northern city of Mosul, officials said. A roadside bomb in Diyala province, north of Baghdad, killed two Iraqi soldiers and injured a third.

In the holy city of Najaf, Iraqi troops arrested five Bangladeshi men they accused of being terrorists, the military said. Officials said the men, who entered Iraq with a tourist company, were found with rocket-propelled grenades, explosives and CDs from training camps in Afghanistan.

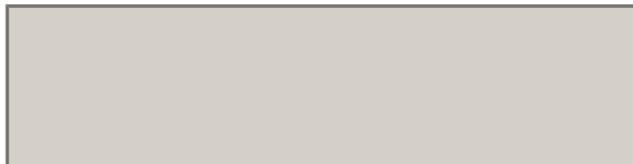
Special correspondents Uthman al-Mokhtar in Fallujah, Dlovan Brwari in Mosul, Saad Sarhan in Najaf and Saad al-Izzi, Zaid Sabah and K.I. Ibrahim in Baghdad contributed to this report.

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