

Civil War: What is the U.S. role in Iraq's dirty war?

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The annual U.S. State Department report on human rights for 2005 has acknowledged that the governing institutions created by the United States in Iraq are engaged in an organized campaign of detention and torture.

The State Department report found, "Police abuses included threats, intimidation, beatings, and suspension by the arms or legs, as well as the reported use of electric drills and cords and the application of electric shocks."

A U.N. human rights report issued last September also found evidence of extrajudicial executions, "Corpses appear regularly in and around Baghdad and other areas. Most bear signs of torture and appear to be victims of extrajudicial executions . . . Serious allegations of extrajudicial executions underline a deterioration in the situation of law and order . . . Accounts consistently point to the systematic use of torture during interrogations at police stations and within other premises belonging to the Ministry of the Interior."

Dr. John Pace, who wrote the U.N. report, has now left Iraq, and reports that 23,000 people are currently imprisoned in detention centers where torture is rife, and that at least 80 percent of them are innocent of any crime.

These reports acknowledge what a small number of journalists have been reporting for at least two years, that a brutal "dirty war" has grown out of the fertile soil of the U.S. occupation. On March 15, 2004, the New Statesman published an article by Stephen Grey, titled "Rule of the Death Squads" ...

The killing of academics has continued, and the minister of education stated recently that 296 faculty and staff members at universities in Iraq were killed in 2005. The Brussels Tribunal on Iraq has forwarded a list of murdered academics to the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions, noting that the victims were from different ethnic, religious and political backgrounds, but were mostly vocal opponents of the U.S. occupation.

On January 14, 2005, Newsweek reported on "The Salvador Option," the proposed use of death squads as part of the U.S. strategy to subdue the country. A U.S. military source told Newsweek, "The Sunni population is paying no price for the support it is giving to the terrorists. From their point of view, it is cost-free. We have to change that equation." This source was expressing quite precisely the rationale that lay behind the dirty wars in Latin America and the worst abuses of the Vietnam War. The purpose of such a strategy is not to identify, detain and kill actual resistance fighters, but rather to terrorize an entire civilian population into submission.

The exile groups who began this dirty war in the early days of the occupation have come to

form the core of successive governing institutions established by the United States. Their campaign of killing and torture has evolved and become institutionalized and their victims now number in the thousands. The State Department and U.N. reports do not address the possibility of a direct U.S. role in the campaign, but the Interior Ministry units that are most frequently implicated in these abuses were formed under U.S. supervision and have been trained by American advisors. The identities of their two principal advisors only reinforce these concerns. They are retired Colonel James Steele and former D.E.A. officer Steven Casteel, and they are both veterans of previous dirty wars.

In El Salvador between 1984 and 1986, Colonel Steele commanded the U.S. Military Advisor Group, training Salvadoran forces that conducted a brutal campaign against the civilian population. At other stages in his career, he performed similar duties during U.S. military operations in Cambodia and Panama. After failing a polygraph test, he confessed to Iran-Contra investigators that he had also shipped weapons from El Salvador to Contra terrorists in Nicaragua, leading Senator Tom Harkin to block his promotion to Brigadier General. Until April 2005, Steele was the principal U.S. advisor to the Iraqi Interior Ministry's "Special Police Commandos," the group most frequently linked to torture and summary executions in recent reports.

Steven Casteel worked in Colombia with paramilitaries called Los Pepes that later joined forces to form the A.U.C. in 1997, and have been responsible for most of the violence against civilians in Colombia. Casteel is now credited with founding the Special Police Commandos in his capacity as senior advisor to the Iraqi Interior Ministry.

Assigning responsibility for atrocities to particular units or individuals is complicated by the dual nature of the Iraqi security forces, which take orders both from their nominal superiors and from separate chains of command in the factional militias that most of them belong to. Ultimate responsibility for abuses is thus blurred by the fiction of the "government" and the militias as distinct entities, when the same people are really involved in both all the way to the top.

However, reports of torture and extrajudicial killings have followed the Special Police Commandos around the country wherever they have been deployed, from Anbar province and Mosul since October 2004, to Samarra in March 2005, to areas around Baghdad since April 2005. The U.N. report highlighted 36 bodies found near Badhra, close to the Iranian border, on August 25, 2005, who were identified by relatives as men who had been arrested by Interior Ministry forces in Baghdad.

A second group of 22 young men whose bodies were found near Badhra on September 27 had been arrested in Baghdad on August 18. Fifty police vehicles full of Special Police Commandos swept through the Iskan neighborhood early that morning seizing young men from their homes. At their funeral, the cleric declared "They took them from their bedrooms. We blame the government, which came to save us from Saddam's terrorism but has brought terrorism worse than Saddam."

After Special Police Commandos were first deployed in Baghdad in April, 14 farmers were found in a shallow grave on May 5, 2005, with their right eyeballs removed and other signs of torture, after they were seen being arrested at a vegetable market. Another incident 10 days later, in which eight bodies were found in a garbage dump, prompted Hareth al-Dhari, the secretary general of the Association of Muslim Scholars, to accuse the Interior Ministry

directly. "This is state terrorism by the Ministry of Interior," he claimed. The defense minister responded by blaming "terrorists wearing military uniforms."

Then there is the work and tragic death of Yasser Salihee, the Iraqi physician turned journalist, who dared to launch an investigation into abuses by the Special Police Commandos. Knight Ridder posthumously published his work under the title "Sunni men in Baghdad targeted by attackers in police uniforms" on June 27, 2005. The cautious language of the report verged on irony, but it described eyewitness accounts of numerous abductions by "large groups of men driving white Toyota Land Cruisers with police markings. The men were wearing police commando uniforms and bulletproof vests, carrying expensive 9-millimeter Glock pistols and using sophisticated radios."

Knight Ridder interviewed Steven Casteel for their story. He blamed the killings on "insurgents" impersonating commandos. As the article pointed out, this raised "troubling questions about how insurgents are getting expensive new police equipment. The Toyotas, which cost more than \$55,000 apiece, and Glocks, at about \$500 each, are hard to come by in Iraq, and they're rarely used by anyone other than Western contractors and Iraqi security forces."

Faik Baqr, the director of the central morgue in Baghdad, would only tell Knight Ridder, "It is a very delicate subject for society when you are blaming the police officers . . . It is not an easy issue. We hear that they are captured by the police and then the bodies are found killed . . . it's obviously increasing." Mr. Baqr recently fled the country after receiving a succession of death threats. Dr. Pace, the U.N. human rights officer who visited the Baghdad morgue regularly, has said that sometimes as many as 80 percent of the bodies in the morgue showed signs of torture.

Yasser Salihee was shot by a U.S. sniper on his way to get gas to drive his family to a swimming pool on his day off. His editor in Washington, Steve Butler, told me he had no reason to think Yasser's death was connected to his work, and the U.S. Army's account of the incident described a "random" shooting based only on rules of engagement that greatly prioritize American over Iraqi lives. However, as Italian investigators found in the case of Nicola Calipari, U.S. accounts of such incidents are not reliable, and U.S. links to the forces Dr. Salihee was investigating cast a dark shadow over his death.

The Iraqi death squads have also killed an American journalist. Steven Vincent was an award-winning art critic from New York who went to Iraq as a freelance writer for National Review, The Wall Street Journal & Harpers, and wrote a book, *In the Red Zone*, about the experiences of Iraqis living under occupation. On July 29, 2005, he wrote in an op-ed piece in the New York Times that many of the police in Basra were also active in Shiite militias that had killed hundreds of Sunnis in the city. Four days later, he was abducted by a group of men in a brand new white Chevy pick-up with police markings. His body was found by the side of a road outside the city with three gunshot wounds to the chest...

Iraqis question whether the chaos unleashed on their country by the United States is the result of incompetence, as most Americans assume, or of a more sinister and deliberate design to destroy their country and society. In fact, setting aside the privatized paradise of Western investment envisioned by a few neoconservative dreamers, U.S. goals in Iraq are fairly limited and don't have much to do with the people of Iraq at all. They can be summarized as "lily pads" (U.S. bases) and oil, and a "government" in the Green Zone to legitimize access to both. The fate of the Iraqi people is only a major concern to U.S.

policymakers to the extent that it threatens to impact these primary goals.

Viewed from this perspective, the reactive twists and turns of U.S. policy in Iraq since March 2003 make a lot more sense: abandoning all but the oil ministry to looting; failing to “reconstruct” anything but the Green Zone and U.S. bases; the alternating marginalization and rehabilitation of different political and sectarian figures and groups; the seemingly counter-productive collective punishment and brutalization of the population; and, underlying everything, the political division of the country along sectarian and ethnic lines and the manipulation of these divisions to prevent the formation of a government that rejects U.S. objectives.

In this context, whether U.S. policymakers realized it or not, a smashed Iraq was always going to serve U.S. goals better than a resurgent, independent Iraq under any government. The dirty war advances U.S. policy by terrorizing the population, as explained in the Newsweek article, but also by transforming nationalist resistance into internecine conflict between Iraqis, leaving U.S. forces secure in their bases. Indeed, U.S. casualty figures have fallen as Iraqi casualties have increased since the bombing of the Golden Dome in Samarra three weeks ago.

Assassinations of academics, doctors and local leaders and the resultant exodus of the professional class deprive the country of the intellectual and political resources that might arrest the slide into chaos and impotence. Iraqi novelist Haifa Zangana wrote in an op-ed piece in the Guardian, “For the occupation’s aims to be fulfilled, independent minds have to be eradicated. We feel that we are witnessing a deliberate attempt to destroy intellectual life in Iraq.”

Should the U.S. permit the dirty war to escalate further, whether by miscalculation or simply as the best option in terms of its primary goals, the history of U.S. military and covert operations in other countries suggests that the U.S. will then escalate its own violence beyond all previous restraints. The U.S. Air Force has reported that air strikes intensified in late 2005 from 25 to 145 strikes per month, and U.S. Special Forces Command is redeploying AC-130 Specter gunships to Iraq, an ominous sign of what is to come. Rumsfeld wants his lily pads and the oil companies want their oil, and what U.S. soldiers see when they look out beyond the walls of their “crusader castles” is of secondary importance to U.S. policy. The tragedy for the people of Iraq is that, whether this policy ultimately achieves any of its goals or not, they will continue to be its victims.

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