

# Death-squad “democracy” in Iraq

Violence and death under U.S. occupation

By [Eric Ruder](#)

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THE U.S. invasion of Iraq was supposed to bring freedom and democracy. But a string of new revelations have exposed the violent reality of life under U.S. occupation.

In mid-February, Iraq’s Interior Ministry announced that it was launching an official investigation into reports that death squads targeting Sunni Muslims are operating from within its own police forces.

Several days earlier, the release of a video of British soldiers savagely beating Iraqi youth made headlines around the world. So did the publication of previously unseen photographs of torture and abuse carried out by U.S. troops at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003.

The mounting evidence of atrocities suffered by Iraqis has reinforced the bitterness many feel toward U.S. and British occupation forces. “If coalition troops are protecting Iraq from terrorism, who is protecting Iraqis from coalition troops?” wondered Firas Al-Atraqchi in Egypt’s *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

The allegations about death squads are not new. Members of the Sunni minority have sounded the alarm for months about reports of uniformed Iraqi police raiding homes and leaving with loved ones—who would turn up days or weeks later, handcuffed and shot in the head.

“Interior Ministry special forces detained my brother and four cousins two weeks ago from [the Sunni] al-Aqsa Mosque in northern Baghdad’s Shula neighbourhood,” security guard Ayad Ali Mahdi told the Associated Press in mid-February. “After two days, their bodies were found in a pickup truck on a highway. It was horrific. Their bodies were tortured and mutilated by drills and an oxyacetylene welder.”

Previously, Iraq’s Interior Ministry dismissed allegations that Shiite militias were operating against Sunni targets from within the ranks of the police. But in early February, irrefutable evidence surfaced after U.S. troops stopped a 22-member death squad at a Baghdad checkpoint, and the men freely admitted they were on their way to execute a Sunni prisoner.

“The amazing thing is...they tell you exactly what they’re going to do,” said Major Gen. Joseph Peterson, the U.S. officer in charge of the civilian police training teams in Iraq.

Four of the men are known to be loyal to the Badr Brigade, a feared militia known for its sectarian violence against Sunnis, which has links to the Supreme Council for the Islamic

Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), one of the leading Shiite parties in Iraq. The head of the Interior Ministry is Bayan Jabr, a SCIRI party member, and few people believe that he will crack down on Badr Brigade members.

Sunni leaders estimate that death squads have murdered some 1,600 Sunnis so far. This scale of killing by paramilitary groups couldn't take place without tacit, if not outright official, support.

That means from the U.S., too. In early 2005, Pentagon war planners around Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld talked of pursuing the "Salvador option"—outsourcing the work of cracking down on Sunni resistance fighters to Shiite and Kurdish paramilitary forces, as the U.S. did during its secret wars on left-wing movements in Central America. Now we have evidence that the "Salvador option" is in full swing.

For the first couple years of the occupation, British troops enjoyed a reputation for compassion, compared to their U.S. counterparts. But anger at their presence has been growing—especially since a full-scale British tank assault on an Iraqi police station to free two British soldiers, who were apprehended and detained after they were discovered disguised as resistance fighters.

Now, tensions are at a breaking point following the airing of a videotape showing a sickening assault by British troops on several Iraqi youths after a January 2004 demonstration to demand jobs.

British troops killed six and injured 11 when they used live ammunition to quell the uprising in Amarah two years ago. But the tape showing the beatings just surfaced.

At one point, a soldier throws one of the prisoners on the floor, while another delivers 10 savage blows with a baton. Then a third soldier binds the boy's wrists, and another strikes him on the back with a baton—at which point the boy goes limp, and a pool of blood forms around his head.

In the background, a British soldier can be heard egging on those committing the atrocities: "You're gonna get it. Yes, naughty little boys! You little fuckers, you little fuckers. Die! Ha, ha!"

Bassem Shaker is one of the boys shown on the tape. "I was one of 250 unemployed people demonstrating in the street in 2004," said Shaker, who came forward after the tape was aired. "But when we reached the governor's office, we were surprised by the presence of the British forces. We started throwing stones at them because we believed they were behind our misery."

After the video surfaces, more than 1,000 people marched on the British consulate in Basra in an angry demonstration. Provincial officials announced that they were severing ties with British authorities and ceasing joint patrols with British troops—who number 8,500 and are based in Basra.

When the first photographs of abuse of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib made world headlines in 2004, U.S. officials fought to keep hundreds of the most gruesome images hidden from view. But several of these photos and some video clips were leaked to an Australian television station, which aired them in mid-February.

One photo showed what appeared to be cigarette burns on a man's buttocks. A video clip revealed a group of hooded, naked men who were forced to stand together and masturbate. One particularly grisly image shows a corpse that seems to have a section torn from its head, while another features a man whose arms are covered in purple bruises.

"The new pictures reignited the long-running pain that started with the occupation of Iraq," Iraqi teacher Hanan Adeeb told a reporter. "It angered me deeply, stabbed me in the heart to see my people paying for no reasonable reason. What hurts me more is for the world to see us tortured in this way without blinking an eye. When I see this, I understand why people think the only way to get Iraq out of this dilemma is to send the Americans away-no matter how."

At a time when U.S. officials and media pundits condemn angry protests through the Arab world against anti-Muslim cartoons published in newspapers around the world, the atrocities committed by U.S. and British troops are a stark reminder of why this anger exists in the first place.

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