

Iraq's Laboratory of Repression

By [Robert Parry](#)

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Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

The Bush administration is turning Iraq into a test tube for modern techniques of repression, from sophisticated biometrics that track populations to devastating weapons systems that combine night-vision optics from drone aircraft, heat resonance imaging and deadly firepower from the sky to kill suspected insurgents.

These high-tech capabilities, when mixed with loose rules of engagement that allow U.S. troops to kill Iraqis at the slightest sign of hostility, have contributed to what U.S. generals and a growing number of American journalists are hailing as an improving security situation.

Or, as President George W. Bush reportedly told Australia's deputy prime minister in September, "We're kicking ass."

U.S. forces have reported some success, too, in working with Iraqi paramilitary groups allied with Sunni sheiks, a strategy similar to operations used in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s to eradicate leftist guerrillas and their political backers.

Amid these developments and the more favorable U.S. news coverage of the war, some neoconservatives are giddy at the prospect of claiming some measure of victory in Iraq, especially after years of facing hostility from Americans over the worsening carnage, including the deaths of more than 3,800 U.S. soldiers.

With renewed confidence, neocons are back to baiting Democratic war critics for failing to appreciate Bush's courage and foresight in dispatching more than 20,000 additional U.S. troops for a "surge" under Gen. David Petraeus.

"Even as evidence has mounted that General Petraeus' new counterinsurgency strategy is succeeding, Democrats have remained emotionally invested in a narrative of defeat and retreat in Iraq, reluctant to acknowledge the progress we are now achieving," said Sen. Joe Lieberman, a neoconservative Independent from Connecticut, in [a Nov. 8 speech](#).

Growing exhaustion with the war among Iraqis is viewed by Bush strategists as another positive indicator.

According to various estimates, the war has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and left some four million – roughly one in six – displaced. Those numbers explain why many Iraqis are desperate for a restoration of some semblance of normal life, even if it is under a U.S.-led occupation that is nearing its fifth anniversary.

Happy Iraqis?

While U.S. generals in Iraq have stressed the gentler aspects of their latest "surge"

successes – and the American press has gone along by publishing front-page articles about new signs of normalcy in Baghdad – the darker side of the counterinsurgency has generally been shoved into brief stories deep inside the newspapers.

On Nov. 20, for instance, the New York Times stressed the upside by leading the newspaper with photos of happy Iraqis in a feature article entitled, “[Baghdad Starts to Exhale as Security Improves.](#)”

If one reads the story to the jump, however, you find that the positive news was that some 20,000 Iraqis – or one-half of one percent of those four million displaced persons – had returned to their abandoned homes and had begun to get their lives back in order.

(Ironically, when the documentary “Fahrenheit 9/11” showed similar footage of Iraqis enjoying normal lives in the days before Bush’s “shock and awe” bombing in 2003, director Michael Moore was denounced as a pro-Saddam propagandist. The truth appears to be that even in difficult circumstances, people still get married and try to find some small pleasures.)

Clearly, too, the major U.S. news organizations remain under intense pressure to play up the positive aspects of the American occupation, much as they did during the early days when they broadcast footage of smiling Iraqi children waving at U.S. soldiers and touted how many schoolrooms had received fresh coats of paint. [For details, see our new book, [Neck Deep.](#)]

The harsh repression surrounding the “surge” has drawn far less U.S. press attention. The grim reality, however, is that an increasingly desperate American military has stepped up its indiscriminate killing and jailing of Iraqis, especially “military-age males” or MAMS.

A conservative counterinsurgency expert recently sent me a video, spliced together by the U.S. military in Iraq. It showed night-vision aerial surveillance of suspected “terrorists” as they moved about at night with what was described as a truck-mounted anti-aircraft gun, the muzzle still warm from firing.

The tiny figures of the “terrorists” walked into a forested area where they were mowed down by miniguns from an AC-130. Their truck also was blown to bits.

It’s not clear, however, how the tiny figures were identified as “terrorists,” except that the term is applied loosely in Iraq, even against Iraqis who consider themselves nationalists resisting a foreign occupation of their homeland.

Other tidbits of troubling information – which often end up below the fold on the inside pages of newspapers – reveal how Iraq steadily has been transformed into a more efficient police state than dictator Saddam Hussein could have ever imagined.

For instance, the “surge” has involved widespread arrests of Iraqi MAMS, sweeps that detain thousands of young men on the flimsiest of suspicions.

During a summer 2007 trip to Iraq, Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies was briefed on U.S. plans to dramatically expand the number of Iraqis in American detention by the end of 2008.

“The detainees have risen to over 18,000 and are projected to hit 30,000 (by the U.S.

command) by the end of the year and 50,000 by the end of 2008," Cordesman wrote in his [trip report](#), adding that the vast majority were Sunnis. "Shiite detainees are often freed while Sunnis are warehoused," he wrote.

When MAMS are detained, the U.S. military processes their biometric information, including retina scans, so a database can be built for tracking suspect Iraqis if they are subsequently released.

Americans rarely get a glimpse of this emerging police state, except when it gets a positive spin. On Nov. 8, for instance, reporters were invited to a crowded U.S. detention center at Camp Victory as nearly 500 of these Iraqis were released in a show of good will.

Some of the Iraqis complained that they had been pulled off the streets and were not allowed to contact their families.

"I was detained in March 2007 for no reason," said one of the former prisoners, Tariq Jabbar, a 25-year-old taxi driver from Zafaraniya, a neighborhood in southeast Baghdad. [[NYT, Nov. 9, 2007](#)]

Other Iraqis have been even less lucky. On Nov. 16, a Sunni tribal group that had been cooperating with the U.S. military said American forces attacked and killed 50 of its members on the suspicion that they were insurgents.

The air and ground assault was launched on Nov. 13 near Taji, a town north of Baghdad. After detecting "hostile intent," helicopters and airplanes strafed buildings and ground troops fired on the Iraqis, the U.S. military said.

"We had some people on the ground who identified these individuals as bad guys, basically," Lt. Justin Cole told the New York Times. "That's why we engaged."

Sheik Jasim Zaidan Khalaf, who is part of the U.S.-backed Awakening Council, said some of his fighters had captured suspected members of Al Qaeda of Mesopotamia and were planning to turn them over to American forces when the attack occurred. Frantic phone calls to the American military failed to stop the assault.

"The whole issue started with a mistake," the sheik said. [[NYT, Nov. 17, 2007](#)]

Sniper Killings

Besides refusing to admit a mistake in the Taji attack, the U.S. military, in effect, has endorsed claims by members of elite Army sniper units that they have been granted broad discretion in killing any Iraqi who crosses the path of their rifle scopes.

On Nov. 8, a U.S. military jury at Camp Liberty in Iraq acquitted the leader of an Army sniper team in the killings of three Iraqi men south of Baghdad during the early days of the "surge." Staff Sgt. Michael Hensley was found not guilty of murder, though he was convicted of planting an AK-47 rifle on one of the dead men and showing disrespect to a superior officer.

In an e-mail interview with the New York Times, Hensley said he was angry with two superior officers who had encouraged him to boost the unit's kill count and then made him the "fall

guy.”

Those rules of engagement apparently allow U.S. soldiers to kill suspected “terrorists” even if the targets are unarmed and not displaying hostile intent.

“Every last man we killed was a confirmed terrorist,” Hensley wrote. “We were praised when bad guys died. We were upbraided when bad guys did not die.” [[NYT, Nov. 9, 2007](#)]

In other words, the evidence from these recent cases supports the suspicion that President Bush and the U.S. military high command have transformed elite units, such as Special Forces and expert sniper teams, into “death squads” with a license to kill unarmed targets who are believed to be “bad guys.”

Though this reality has been the subject of whispers within the U.S. intelligence community for several years, it surfaced into public view with two attempted prosecutions of American soldiers, including Hensley, whose defense attorneys responded by citing “rules of engagement” that permit the killing of suspected insurgents.

The case of Army sniper Jorge G. Sandoval Jr., who served under Hensley, also revealed a classified program in which the Pentagon’s Asymmetric Warfare Group encouraged U.S. military snipers in Iraq to drop “bait” – such as electrical cords and ammunition – and then shoot Iraqis who pick up the items, according to evidence in the Sandoval case. [[Washington Post, Sept. 24, 2007](#)]

(Like Hensley, Sandoval was acquitted of murder but convicted of a lesser charge, the planting of copper wire on one of the slain Iraqis to make it look as if the dead man were involved in making explosive devices.)

Afghan Parallel

Another recent case of authorized murder of an insurgent suspect surfaced at a military court hearing at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in mid-September. Two U.S. Special Forces soldiers took part in the execution of an Afghani who was suspected of leading an insurgent group.

Though the Afghani, identified as Nawab Buntangyar, responded to questions and offered no resistance when encountered on Oct. 13, 2006, he was shot dead by Master Sgt. Troy Anderson on orders from his superior officer, Capt. Dave Staffel.

According to evidence at the Fort Bragg proceedings, an earlier Army investigation had cleared the two soldiers because they had been operating under “rules of engagement” that empowered them to kill individuals who have been designated “enemy combatants,” even if the targets were unarmed and presented no visible threat.

Yet, whatever the higher-ups approve as “rules of engagement,” the practice of murdering unarmed suspects remains a violation of the laws of war and – theoretically at least – would open up the offending country’s chain of command to war-crimes charges.

The troubling picture is that the U.S. chain of command, presumably up to President Bush, has authorized “rules of engagement” that allow targeted killings – as well as other objectionable tactics including arbitrary arrests, “enhanced interrogations,” kidnappings of suspects in third countries with “extraordinary renditions” to countries that torture, secret

CIA prisons, and “reeducation camps” for younger detainees.

The U.S. counterinsurgency and security operations in Iraq and Afghanistan also have been augmented by heavily armed mercenaries, such as the Blackwater “security contractors” who operate outside the law and were accused by Iraqi authorities of killing 17 Iraqi civilians in a shooting incident on Sept. 16.

The use of lethal force against unarmed suspects and civilians has a notorious history in irregular warfare especially when an occupying army finds itself confronting an indigenous resistance in which guerrillas and their political supporters blend in with the local population.

In effect, Bush’s “global war on terror” appears to have reestablished what was known during the Vietnam War as Operation Phoenix, a program that assassinated Vietcong cadre, including suspected communist political allies.

Bush’s global strategy also has similarities to “Operation Condor” in which South American right-wing military regimes in the 1970s sent assassins on cross-border operations to eliminate “subversives.”

Despite quiet support for these Latin American “death squads,” the U.S. government presented itself, then as now, as the great defender of human rights, criticizing repressive countries that engaged in extrajudicial killings and arbitrary detentions.

That gap between American rhetoric and reality widened after 9/11 as Bush waged his “war on terror,” while continuing to impress the American news media with pretty words about his commitment to human rights – as occurred in [his address to the United Nations on Sept. 25](#).

Under Bush’s remarkable double standards, he has taken the position that he can override both international law and the U.S. Constitution in deciding who gets basic human rights and who doesn’t. He sees himself as the final judge of whether people he deems “bad guys” should live or die, or face indefinite imprisonment and even torture.

Effective Immunity

While such actions by other leaders might provoke demands for an international war-crimes tribunal, there would appear to be no likelihood of that in this case since the offending nation is the United States. Given its “superpower” status, the United States and its senior leadership are effectively beyond the reach of international law.

However, even if the Bush administration can expect *de facto* immunity from a war-crimes trial, the brutal tactics of the “global war on terror” – as well as in Iraq and Afghanistan – continue to alienate the Muslim world and undermine much of Bush’s geopolitical strategy. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Bush’s Global Dirty War](#).”]

The ugly image of Americans killing unarmed Iraqis also helps explain the enduring hostility of Iraqis toward the presence of U.S. troops.

While the Bush administration has touted the improved security created by the “surge” of additional U.S. troops into Iraq, a [survey of more than 2,000 Iraqis](#) by the BBC, ABC News and the Japanese news agency, NHK, discovered mounting opposition to the U.S.

occupation.

In August, 85 percent of those polled said they had little or no confidence in American and British occupation forces, up from 82 percent in February, when the “surge” began. Only 18 percent said they thought the coalition forces had done a good job, down from 24 percent in February. Forty-seven percent said occupying forces should leave now, up from 35 percent.

But a core question of the Iraq War always has been how hard the Iraqis would fight. President Bush and the neocons initially got that question wrong in March 2003 when instead of a “cake walk,” U.S. troops encountered surprisingly stiff resistance and, even after taking Baghdad, faced a determined insurgency.

The neocons now believe the U.S. occupation has turned a corner, that rank-and-file Iraqis have suffered so severely that they are ready to accept the continued U.S. military occupation with declining resistance.

In the view of some influential neocons, this “success” in Iraq means it is now time for the United States to turn its attention to other troubled Muslim countries, such as Iran and Pakistan.

Two prominent “think tank” backers of the “surge” – Frederick Kagan and Michael O’Hanlon – were given space in the New York Times “Week in Review” section to propose a U.S. military intervention in Pakistan if unrest there spreads.

“If we got a large number of troops into the country, what would they do?” Kagan and O’Hanlon asked. “If a holding operation in the nation’s center was successful, we would probably then seek to establish order in the parts of Pakistan where extremists operate.” [\[NYT, Nov. 18, 2007\]](#)

Having tasted a measure of success in Iraq, the neocons now are raising their sights toward an even wider war in the Muslim world.

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, [Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush](#), was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](#). His two previous books, [Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq](#) and [Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'](#) are also available there. Or go to [Amazon.com](#).

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