

Torture and Extrajudicial Killings in Iraq

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For the last week the US government has been reeling both from the revelation that it employed white phosphorous in Fallujah and from the discovery that the government it helped install is running secret detention centres in which prisoners are subjected to serious abuse.

The detention facility in the Jadiriyah district of Baghdad was discovered on Sunday 13 November when US soldiers entered an Interior Ministry building in their hunt for a missing 15-year-old. What they discovered was a chamber of horrors. More than 170 prisoners were packed into a foetid underground bunker. They were half-starved and many of them had been seriously beaten. Torture instruments were found hidden above a false ceiling and reports stated that some prisoners had been flayed.

Predictably, the US embassy issued a statement denouncing the treatment and insisting that torture was unacceptable, while Iraqi prime minister Ibrahim Jafaari insisted there would be an enquiry and Hussein Kamal, deputy head of the Interior Ministry, downplayed the incident. Such denials failed to convince the intrepid western media, which cannily pointed to Shia domination of the government, especially the Interior Ministry. A number of reports also cited rumours that the facility had been used by the Badr Brigade, the former armed wing of The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. For the majority of western journalists, the incident is yet another example of what they claim is a wave of sectarian violence sweeping Iraq.

What the western media has so far failed to disclose is that a strikingly similar incident occurred just a day after the nominal handover of power to Ayad Allawi's Interim Government. On 29 June 2004, military police from the Oregon National Guard stormed the compound of the Interior Ministry itself to rescue dozens of detainees whom they had observed being tortured. As at Jadiriyah, the victims had been deprived of food and savagely beaten. Dozens more detainees were discovered in sheds, alongside instruments of torture. Some of the detainees were in a life-threatening condition and the guardsmen began to administer emergency medical care.

Most shockingly, when the guardsmen radioed for support, senior US officers ordered them to stand down. After hours of tense negotiations, the guardsmen reluctantly withdrew, leaving the prisoners with their abusers.

The incident demonstrates two extremely important points. Firstly, the latest discovery is not news for US authorities, who have been aware of serious abuse taking place inside Interior Ministry facilities for more than a year and taken no action to prevent it. Secondly, such abuse cannot simply be ascribed to sectarian Shia control of the Interior Ministry. In fact, many of the most senior posts at the Ministry continue to be filled by ex-Baathists,

including some of those most associated with suppression of the Shia rising that followed the first Gulf War.

The practice of torture at Interior Ministry facilities is in many ways the tip of the iceberg. For the last year hundreds of bodies – the apparent victims of extrajudicial executions – have been turning up across Iraq, especially Baghdad. Typically, the victims are bound and blindfolded and have been dispatched with shots to the head and chest. Many of them also bear the marks of brutal torture.

The only serious investigation to have been carried out within Iraq was by an Iraqi journalist, Yasser Salihee. He pointed to the hundreds of execution victims making their way through the Baghdad morgue and highlighted the fact that in many cases those victims are known to have been arrested by gunmen in police uniforms, sporting expensive police equipment, including vehicles, weapons and sophisticated radios. His final article was published on 27 June, three days after his own assassination at the hands of a US sniper, but his allegations echo those of Sunni groups, who have accused the government of state terrorism.

The majority of specific accusations have focused on a unit called the Wolf Brigade, attached to the Interior Ministry's Special Police Commandos. This unit, formed in autumn last year, saw its first major action in Mosul in November 2004 in what seems to have been a serious clash with resistance fighters. Dozens of bodies began to appear on the streets as the commandos conducted sweeps of the city.

More recently, in July, the Wolf Brigade is known to have been responsible for an incident in which 11 bricklayers were seized at a Baghdad hospital and locked in the back of a police vehicle in searing heat for 16 hours. Ten of the men died and doctors carrying out a post mortem concluded that the victims had also been subjected to torture, including by electrocution.

Whilst death-squad-style killings are now generally acknowledged, the perpetrators are almost always claimed to belong to Shiite militias, perhaps under the control of a Shiite-dominated Interior Ministry. Even the Wolf Brigade is linked with sectarian violence, but the reality is that the Special Police Commandos are composed of ex special-forces and Republican Guard personnel and were established by former Baathists with long histories of involvement with the CIA, under the supervision of US counterinsurgency experts. One advisor was the same James Steele who previously commanded the US military mission in El Salvador at the height of that country's unspeakably dirty civil war. There, Steele was responsible for creating the 'elite' squads that accounted for the bulk of the army's largely civilian casualties.

Another was Steven Casteel, the most senior US advisor within the Interior Ministry and the man who successfully negotiated the withdrawal of the Oregon National Guardsmen. Some of his experience was gained in Colombia, where he was involved in the Centra Spike operations, a data-collection exercise in which lists of the associates of cocaine baron Pablo Escobar were murdered by the Los Pepes death squads. Los Pepes went on to form the nucleus for the present murderous AUC.

The US, largely through the CIA, has a long history of involvement with genocidal intelligence operations, from Indonesia under Suharto, through Operation Phoenix in Vietnam, to present-day Colombia. The current mass arrests in Iraq and subsequent killings

bear all the hallmarks of such an operation. By analogy, one can reasonably guess that the current flood of victims will include anyone opposing US hegemony, such as the hundreds of teachers and academics who have already been assassinated, as well as the human 'waste' generated through 'heavy interrogation'. A further possibility is that ordinary Sunni Iraqis are deliberately being victimised as part of a strategy of fomenting sectarian strife designed to engineer the Balkanisation of Iraq. With that in mind, it is time to start asking hard questions about the role of the two British SAS men caught with a car load of explosives and accused by Iraqis of planning to attack a Shia religious festival.

According to The Guardian, one former Interior Ministry detainee claimed prisoners prayed to be transferred to Abu Ghraib. This is no commendation of US treatment of prisoners, but only highlights the fact that many of the worst crimes are reserved, as they have been in Latin America, for US proxies. In El Salvador Noam Chomsky noted that it was not enough for US-backed paramilitaries to kill someone; instead they might be decapitated and their head placed on a spike. In Iraq similar distinctions exist. The victims of US-trained death squads are not just humiliated; their eyes are gouged out, their skin is peeled off and electric drills are driven through their knees.

For more information about the role of death squads in Iraq and media disinformation relating to it, see the following articles by Max Fuller

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