

# US Collusion with Iraqi Death Squads

Diyala - A Laboratory of Civil War?

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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

## A recent case study in the dynamics of occupation and sectarianism

### Part 1:

#### Operation Knockout in Diyala Demonstrates US Collusion with Death Squads

In November last year Sunni members of the Diyala provincial council began to boycott meetings in protest at a 13 November raid on the provincial capital Baquba and surrounding towns, according to a [report](#) by UPI's Pentagon correspondent, Pamela Hess. According to a US military official, the boycotting council members sent a letter to the chairman of the council in which they alleged that that raid had been orchestrated by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) as part of a plan to disenfranchise Sunnis during the upcoming elections.

Such accusations chime with almost every commentator it seems both inside and outside Iraq, who have lavished criticism on SCIRI and the paramilitary militia known as the Badr Brigade associated with it. Whilst anti-occupation sources tend to regard SCIRI and Badr as US allies, the Western media have chosen to focus on their relationship with Iran, where they were primarily based since their foundation in 1982. In either case, commentators charge that SCIRI's militiamen have infiltrated or been amalgamated into Iraq's nascent security forces. Many reports make little or no distinction between the Badr Brigade and the security forces. In the Western media lens, this depiction tends to function as apologia for human rights abuses attributed to the security forces (for examples of this in action, see Solomon Moore [writing](#) in the Los Angeles Times or Jonathan Steele [writing](#) in the London Guardian).

Hess agrees with the media consensus, stating that 'anecdotal evidence of targeted and unsanctioned violence against Sunnis from cities across Iraq suggests Badr or other rogue elements have a presence throughout the ministry'. In the case of the Baquba raid which had prompted the walkout by Sunni councilors, Hess informs us that in this instance it was the Wolf Brigade, an 'Iraqi special police unit of some 2,000', that 'swept into Baqubah, the

capital of Diyala province, and arrested some 300 people'. As if to clarify matters, she then tells us, citing a US military source, that 'The operation came in the wake of the appointment by the Shiite governor of Diyala of a new police chief for the province ... The new police chief has no law enforcement experience ... but he is associated with the SCIRI, the political arm of the Badr brigade'.

But in fact what initially appears to be an open and shut case is not so straightforward. While, according to the same military spokesperson, the governor may have requested the raid 'to show that he's got muscle to flex', 'US police assistance teams worked with the Wolf Brigade to plan the operation and American assets - including a surveillance drone, medical team and a quick reaction force - were assigned to support it'. Nonetheless, the spokesperson goes on to imply that support was reluctant, adding, 'We put forces with each of their units so that we could watch them work'.

In the case of the 13 November raid, outside observers are fortunate that, unlike Pamela Hess, they do not have to rely solely on one military spokesperson feeding a line to the press. The raid in question was called Operation Knockout and was the first time that the Iraqi Special Police Forces of the Ministry of the Interior had planned, prepared and executed a division-size raid 'designed to destroy or disrupt all of their [ie insurgents'] cells in a large locality in a single night'. For a far more in-depth depiction of the action, we can be grateful to US Army Col James K Greer, who was so impressed by the whole operation that he wrote an [account](#) of it for the November-December issue of *Military Review*.

The following passages are taken from Greer's account.

*In late October, the minister of the interior [Bayan Jabr] told the Operations Directorate to study options for a large-scale, simultaneous strike in Diyala against a large number of suspected insurgents and their support and information networks ...*

*[On 5 November] the Operations Directorate provided a list of insurgent and terrorist targets to the Public Order Division commander with a warning to be prepared to move to Ba'qubah and conduct operations to detain those targets.*

*The Public Order Division immediately began planning, focusing on developing target folders for the hundreds of discrete targets forces would have to secure. Simultaneously, Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) was notified through its cell in the MOI National Command Center. Planning and coordination continued with an MOI/Multinational Command-Iraq (MNC-I) meeting on 9 November ...*

*Throughout the planning and coordination stage of Operation Knockout, Special Police Transition Teams (SPTTs) under Colonel Gordon B. 'Skip' Davis and Colonel Jeffrey Buchanan advised the Iraqis and planned and coordinated their own support to the operation. These teams of 10 to 12 soldiers lived, trained, and fought alongside the Iraqi Special Police 24 hours a day and contributed significantly to the Iraqi's development ...*

*At execution, Public Order Division elements, reinforced by a brigade of Iraqi Special Police commandos, moved along three separate routes to their objectives in and around Ba'qubah, conducting clean-up operations in small towns along the way ...*

*Operation Knockout demonstrated the necessity for and effectiveness of intelligence-based COIN [counterinsurgency] operations. The MOI Intelligence Office of the Operations Directorate spent several weeks developing the targets that would eventually be raided. Local informants confirmed potential targets, and the Intelligence Office produced one- to three-page papers detailing why each individual was targeted ... Special Police units developed a target folder for each individual. Surreptitious eyes-on provided last-minute updates to target sets.*

In the rare case of Operation Knockout, we even have a third, official military [account](#) of proceedings given at a press briefing. This description adds one further important detail, which is that 70 per cent of the 377 detainees were Sunni, 30 per cent were Shia and 10 were Kurds. While these proportions may not accurately reflect the ethno-confessional makeup of Diyala province (exact figures are hard to come by), they do indicate that the raid was far from exclusively directed against Sunni targets, despite popular impression.

## **Implications of the reports**

This illustration of an intelligence-based counterinsurgency operation undertaken by US-trained proxy forces, which could have been written just as well about Vietnam, the Philippines, El Salvador or present-day Colombia, reveals a number of important points about the conflict in Iraq.

### *(i) SCIRI had no part in orchestrating Operation Knockout*

One of the most important conclusions to be drawn is that we can be certain SCIRI had absolutely nothing to do with the 13 November raid on Baquba and its environs. This simple fact discredits 99% of what has been written in the mainstream media about the role of SCIRI and Badr within the new Interior Ministry.

*(ii) Even within Iraq it is very difficult to accurately assess security operations*

It is striking in this case that, if we are to believe Hess's sources, even public representatives on the ground in Iraq are unable to distinguish between what they perceive to be sectarian paramilitaries and the forces operating directly on behalf of the Occupation. This is in no way intended to represent a criticism of those on the ground, but only highlights the duplicity of the US Imperial war machine, whose goal is to cover its own tracks and spread discord amongst its enemies.

*(iii) The Wolf Brigade continues to be used by the media as a fob-off*

It is extremely revealing of the mainstream media position that even in Hess's relatively detailed and informative report, the responsibility for a joint MOI/MNF-I operation was subtly shifted towards SCIRI and that it was the Wolf Brigade which was reported to have carried out the raid. While Hess does not underline the point in this piece, the reference is unlikely to be missed altogether. The significance of the attribution is that in many media analyses of human rights abuses related to the Ministry of the Interior, the Wolf Brigade has been singled out for blame. Rather than seeking to analyze its structure, most commentators have been content to describe it as a police commando unit attached to the Interior Ministry with a specifically Shiite leaning (for instance, see the [Knight Ridder report](#) by Hannah Allam, now very hard to find on the Internet). In this UPI report, the US military spokesperson describes the Wolf Brigade as a 'public order Brigade' rather than as police commandos. In fact, the MOI special police forces are made up of both police commandos and public order brigades, all of them trained and supported by embedded advisors from MNF-I. According to Greer's account, the 13 November raid was planned by a Public Order Division and was conducted by Public Order Division elements, reinforced by a brigade of Special Police Commandos, probably the Wolf Brigade. The effect of the UPI report is once again to divert attention from structure and organization and frame discourse within narrow sectarian lines that exclude US responsibility.

*(iv) Counterinsurgency operations are not in the remit of backroom militias*

In view of the persistent reports that the majority of extrajudicial killings can be attributed to members of the security forces following the detention of the victims (eg [UN Human Rights Mission](#), [Iraqi Organization for Follow-up and Monitoring](#)), it is beholden on all interested parties to take any insight into the workings of those forces and the processes by which 'targets' are selected for arrest with the utmost seriousness. Yet no journalist has so much as mentioned the existence of an Operations Directorate, still less MNF-I's cell within the MOI National Command Center, while the one journalist that seems to have written about Operation Knockout has fallen back into the familiar groove of 'allegiance to Shiite groups' etc. The reason that I have quoted from Greer's account at such length is to demonstrate the enormous behind-the-scenes effort required to conduct counterinsurgency warfare.

To reiterate the stages by which targets were selected:

- 1) Two months before the operation the intelligence section of the Operations Directorate began preparing a list of suspects based on intelligence gleaned from local informers;
- 2) The intelligence section produced dossiers on individual suspects;
- 3) One week before the operation the intelligence section passed the list of suspects to the Public Order Division commander;
- 4) The Public Order Division prepared folders on the individual suspects, making use of an airborne mapping capability;
- 5) Before commencement of the operation, last minute visual checks were made of individual suspects.

In the case of Operation Knockout, which seems to have half-served as PR exercise, Greer et al are falling over themselves to persuade their audience that the police behaved in exemplary fashion and that detainees were treated humanely. So how far is it possible to regard this operation as representative and how should we evaluate such operations in human rights terms?

## **Beyond Knockout**

By far the most important aspect of this operation from an analytical perspective is that it was 'Intelligence Based'. It is quite clear from Greer's description that what that means in layman's terms is that lists of targets were put together in some sort of centralized planning hub before being passed to individual police units responsible for seizing them in the middle of the night.

Whilst nothing like the level of detail offered in Greer's report is available for most of the cases of arrest and extrajudicial killing by the security forces, in a few accounts we do have evidence that the victims have been selected based on lists of suspects (eg see [Sydney Morning Herald, 11 March 2006](#), [Reuters, 17 November 2005](#)), These details are the hallmarks of 'intelligence based' counterinsurgency operations and strongly indicate that most or all of the campaigns of mass arrests taking place nightly across Iraq emanate from the intelligence offices of the Interior Ministry. This impression is further reinforced by another [UPI account](#) of an earlier raid that took place in Baghdad in June 2004. Once again, we are told that the lists of suspects (in this case ordinary criminals) had been meticulously prepared in advance through the use of informers by the intelligence branch at the Ministry of the Interior, incidentally under the command of a Sunni Kurd.

Such operations simply cannot be conceived and carried out from some backroom at Badr

or Mahdi HQ. If we were still to persist in advocating that SCIRI, or some such party, was behind these operations, against all of the available evidence, we would also be forced to conclude that the US had ceased to have influence inside the Interior Ministry, unless of course they were acting in tandem. In fact, we know that Iraq's entire new intelligence apparatus was built by the CIA (see [Washington Post, 11 December 2003](#), [Knight Ridder, 8 May 2005](#)) and we can be certain that the intelligence offices at the Interior Ministry and elsewhere remain saturated with US intelligence agents/advisors ([New York Times, 14 December 2005](#)).

And despite reassurances from the US military that Knockout represents the new style of 'humane' Interior Ministry operation, the empirical evidence keeps mounting up, day upon day, week upon week and month upon month, that death squads are continuing their genocidal campaign without stint. The [latest figures](#) from Baghdad suggest that an average of 70 new victims of extrajudicial execution appear in the Morgue every single day and these are now starting to be [backed up](#) in Basra, where we told that on average one person is killed per hour.

Let us pray that in this case the more than 300 detainees taken during Operation Knockout have indeed been treated humanely. In this case it is beholden not just on the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior but on Multi Nation Force-Iraq to demonstrate that every one of the people seized from the Baquba vicinity on 13 November has either been released or continues to be held in 'humane conditions'. If MNF-I really wants to prove that it is not responsible for the death squads, it must publicly release the names of all 377 supposed suspects so that the world can see who it is arresting and tell us where they are today. It needs to prove to its critics that the human rights of its detainees have been respected and that they have not been hung by their wrists until their arms are dislocated or beaten until it is impossible to tell the color of their skin, or burnt with cigarettes, or had their eyes gouged out or their fingernails removed. MNF-I needs to prove that one of its proxy policemen hasn't tortured a single one of them with an electric drill and thrown their body onto the street like the other thousand that appear every month in Baghdad. It needs to prove it, because otherwise we'll know for sure that this time it ordered it!

## **Part 2:**

### **Out for the count? Interpreting conflicting narratives**

Operation Knockout proved to be no final engagement for the security forces either in Diyala province or just around Baquba. Since then the social and political space has been dominated by at least five forms of violence. The following analysis is drawn from a trawl of mainstream Western media sources on the Internet and from a day by day examination of Iraqi Resistance reports compiled by [Free Arab Voice](#) between 13 November and the middle of May. It is not intended to be seen as comprehensive.

*(i) Police/army raids*

Resistance reports make reference to around a dozen supplemental raids since Operation Knockout in which hundreds more Iraqis have been detained. No information is available about the fate of the detainees and detailed reports of the raids themselves are absent. The raids are variously described as having been undertaken by 'troops', 'Interior Ministry Shock Troops', 'US occupation forces backed up by Iraqi puppet army troops', 'Interior Ministry troops', 'militiamen with official government documents issued by the Ministry of the Interior', etc. From such descriptions it is difficult to know which units were responsible, although in most cases one suspects units of the Special Police. Western media sources do not make identification any easier and fewer raids have been reported.

*(ii) Resistance attacks against US/Iraqi security forces, including killings of alleged collaborators and members of Shiite militias*

Most of these attacks took the form of roadside bombs, but well-orchestrated assaults on police/army bases and checkpoints were also frequently reported. A handful of alleged 'collaborators' are also reported to have been executed by Resistance fighters.

*(iii) 'Mysterious' bombings*

Several bombs which exploded in civilian areas were described in Resistance reports as mysterious. Mosques seem to have been the intended targets in several instances; one is reported to have been Sunni, one Shiite, and two others are not attributed. Other targets included a girls' school and a crowded market. According to a [report](#) for Middle East Online, dated 1 May 2006, the police chief of Baquba claimed that 70 bombs had been planted on the city streets in the preceding two weeks alone, of which 40 had gone off, killing 12 people.

*(iv) Extrajudicial killings and assassinations*

Several instances of extrajudicial killings bearing the hallmarks of death squads have been reported. On 23 December 2005 three bodies were found with multiple gunshot wounds in Southern Baquba; the bodies were found blindfolded with their hands and legs bound. On 23 February gunmen pulled factory workers off buses and killed 47 of them; the bullet-riddled bodies were found behind a brick factory. On 25 February 2006 13 members of a Shia family were killed in their home by gunmen. On the same day, 12 farm laborers, both Sunnis and Shiites, were found shot dead in an orchard; the victims had been shot in the head and face. On 26 February two boys were killed when gunmen opened fire on a group of teenagers playing football. On 28 February nine bodies were found in wasteland around Tarfiya; the victims had been shot in the head. On 27 March at least 18 bodies of males were found in a deserted brush area around Tarfiya; the victims are variously described as having been decapitated or having been shot in the head. On 8 April 10 bodies were found in black body bags in Balad Rooz; the victims had been shot in the head. On 19 April three



professors were killed when gunmen opened fire at Diyala University. On 10 May 11 workers at an electrical plant were killed by gunmen on their way from or to work. On 13 May four unidentified bodies with bullet holes in their heads and chests were dumped in a stream in Khan Bani Saad; according to one report they were Shiites. It should be noted that the spike in reports after 23 February may well represent increased media attention following the bombing of the Askari mosque in Samarra, rather than any quantifiable surge in attacks.

(v) *Ethnic cleansing*

According to *Quds Press*, quoted in a Resistance report for 8 March, around 1000 Sunni families have fled their homes in the Madain area after receiving death threats from members of the police and special police.

While these accounts of various forms of violence and intimidation undoubtedly reflect a climate of pervasive and widespread violence, including an ongoing struggle between the forces of occupation and an organic resistance, it is extremely difficult to make objective comments about their significance. The following passages drawn from four separate accounts underline this point.

a) *'If the insurgency stays at this level, I expect to free up combat power before the end of our deployment,' [US Col] Salazar says.*

[The Nation, 9 April 2006](#)

b) *In this confessionally divided provincial capital [Baquba] just north of Baghdad, the mounting sectarian tensions that have gripped the new Iraq have spelled a spate of tit-for-tat killings of civilians as Shiite militiamen avenge attacks by Sunni insurgents, sparking a vicious circle of violence ...*

*"Drive-by shootings and other gun attacks have proved deadlier, killing nearly 40 people in the past two weeks," Bawi said ...*

*The apparent impotence of Iraq's fledgling security forces in the face of the worsening bloodshed has sparked anger among residents.*

[Middle East Online, 1 May 2006](#)

c) *rebels spread control over most of Diyala Province of which the city of Baquba is the capital.*



*The city's nearly 350,000 live in a state of terror as the security forces charged with keeping law and order can hardly protect themselves.*

[Azzaman, 11 May 2006](#)

*d) Mrs Mohammed is a Kurd and a Shia in Baquba, which has a majority of Sunni Arabs. Her husband, Ahmed, who traded fruit in the local market, said: 'They threatend the Kurds and the Shia and told them to get out ...*

*It was impossible to travel to Baquba, the capital of Diyala, from Baghdad without extreme danger*

[Independent, 20 May 2006](#)

It should be noted that the US assessment referred to here predated a major increase in attacks against occupation forces that began towards the end of April, which might well invalidate the opinion expressed by US Col Salazar.

Nonetheless, even comparing these descriptions of the overall situation with the various accounts of violence that are available is far from straightforward. The account in Middle East Online indicates a level of violence against civilians that is not adequately reflected in either the mainstream media nor the Resistance reports. However, it remains credible because we know the same relationship would hold in areas where we have a better overall impression of the extent of the violence.

## **Uniting the narratives**

The accounts offered in the *Independent* and *Azzaman* appear to stand in total opposition to one another. If the Resistance has spread control over Diyala, surely a communitarian civil war of the kind alluded to in the *Independent* is extremely unlikely to be taking place. That is, unless we are prepared to entertain a very special definition of 'civil war'. Such a definition would require us to accept that the Resistance represents an exclusively Sunni faction (not even borne out in the US military's statistics for detained suspects, see above) and that the security forces, especially the counterinsurgency brigades, represent an exclusively Shiite faction (not borne out in any [credible analysis](#) of their composition, nor in their relationship to the occupying powers, including the presence of special police transition teams). Thus, with a fierce conflict taking place between the Occupation and the Resistance, it might indeed be possible to conclude that a 'sectarian civil war' was

underway. This seems to be the preferred definition for the Western media establishment.

But what of Mrs Mohammed? It is possible that angry Sunnis have responded to perceived sectarian assaults in kind, but, assuming that this story is real, it seems much more likely that she and her family are the victims of a cruel deception designed to fracture the country along ethno-confessional lines. More and more evidence of such a pattern is starting to emerge, including a [recent account](#) published by the BRussells Tribunal anonymously from within Iraq, which refers to evidence that the same special covert units are employed to fabricate sectarian attacks against both Sunni and Shiite Iraqis. In addition, there are indications that other killings are being carried out by death squads operating from within the paramilitary [Facilities Protection Service](#).

If we want to make sense of what is happening in Iraq we need to recognize that words like SCIRI, Badr and Mahdi, together with phrases like civil war, sectarian violence, revenge killings and tit-for-tat murders all serve to deemphasize the centrality of the occupation and mystify what is a very real and deadly counterinsurgency war.

From an external perspective, it is extremely difficult to discern whether the Resistance has seized control of Diyala or whether a genuine civil war along sectarian lines has broken out. What we must suspect, though, based on concrete reasoning, is that the security forces trained, armed and guided by the British and Americans will be committing terrible crimes against humanity in their role as attack dogs for the occupation.

This is not to try to say that every single killing is carried out by the security forces, but it is to say that the security forces are so obviously involved in a great many cases that the Western media and other apologists for the occupation and abettors of genocide have been forced to resort to claiming that the security forces have been infiltrated by various militias. If there are militias in the Ministry of Interior, you can be sure that they are militias that stand to attention whenever a US colonel enters the room. And if there are masked gunmen claiming to be from Badr or Mahdi or anywhere else, the first question we should all be asking is where did they get their lists of victims from? For my money, they will have come straight out of the Intelligence Office of the Operations Directorate at the US-run Ministry of the Interior.

## **Appendix: The Memory Vortex**

### *Communities fight back against raids*

Two reports in May seem to indicate that communities are seeking ways to fight back against nighttime raids. According to an Iraqi Resistance [report](#) dated 1 May 2006, citing

*Mafkarat al-Islam*, fierce fighting erupted around the areas of al-Hadid and Abu Zayd when a raid by 'Iraqi puppet police and puppet army troops' was opposed by armed residents. According to the report, nine of the assailants and dozens of locals were killed in the fighting. Following the battle, US troops joined the Iraqi forces in carrying out massive and indiscriminate arrests.

On 11 May, international press sources [reported](#) that village leaders and clerics alerted police and US soldiers when gunmen, some of them wearing military uniforms, raided two 'Sunni' villages near Khan Bani Saad. According to these reports, US and Iraqi forces were able to rescue seven of 10 men that were being abducted. Thirty people were arrested, including an unknown number of the gunmen. According to the reports, some gunmen told police they belonged to the Shiite militia loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. This attribution was supported by the Interior Minister at the time, Bayan Jabr, who claimed that the gunmen were carrying badges identifying them as belonging to the Force Protection Service (FPS) of the Ministry of Health, which has been reported to be under the control of Muqtada al-Sadr. A spokesman for al-Sadr subsequently claimed that the FPS members had gone to help, according to the [Christian Science Monitor](#).

It is difficult to believe that these two accounts are not related despite the time gap, although I can find no evidence that this is the case. It is also difficult not to credit the *Mafkarat al-Islam* as being a far more plausible general depiction of events. Clearly, if Sadr militiamen had formed a secret death squad to attack villages around Khan Bani Saad, we should be hearing about it all over the press. Unfortunately, this is yet another case 'under investigation' that is likely to be consigned to the dustbin of history and blacked out by the Western media.

#### *Diyala police linked to death squads*

On 27 March, in what was described as 'an unusual admission', Reuters [reported](#) that the Iraqi Interior Ministry had arrested a police major, Arkan al-Bawi, in Diyala province for operating death squads in Baquba. According to the Interior Ministry, [Bawi confessed](#) that his gang members wore police uniforms stolen during attacks on police checkpoints and that they had killed many people. On 28 March, Reuters [reported](#) that the police chief in Diyala, major-general Ghassan al-Bawi, the brother of Arkan, had been arrested for 'corruption and threatening security'. Unbelievably, even this bombshell of a story died instantly [in fact, the story now seems to have been removed from the Internet; the version offered here is copied from a printed extract of the original]. Even more remarkably, on 28 April, provincial police chief Maj. Ghassan al-Bawi was [reported](#) to have stated that troops and police were on the streets of Baquba and roads to the city were closed because of fears the insurgents might regroup [This story too is now extremely hard to come by, with only two examples still available through Google; the only other evidence that Ghassan al-Bawi has retained his post is a cached BBC page which refers to an Interview with al-Bawi in June 2006]. It appeared that the arrest of two senior police officers linked to death squads in Diyala had simply not taken place at all. Perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. Perhaps it was another major-general Ghassan al-Bawi that had been arrested for 'threatening

security'!

If we go right back to Hess's UPI report of the November 13 raid, we will recall that the new police chief 'is associated with the SCIRI, the political arm of the Badr brigade'. Is that not then newsworthy either! Mahdi militiamen in death squad arrested in act and SCIRI police appointee linked to death squads! Apparently not. One can only assume that any detailed independent investigation would rapidly be forced to conclude that neither Mahdi nor SCIRI were responsible, but the US-installed police force were.

**Max Fuller** has worked for some years as a member of the Colombia Solidarity Campaign in the UK and has read extensively on US policy and Latin America. He is the author of several reports published in the 'Bulletin of the Colombia Solidarity Campaign'. Max Fuller is the author of '[For Iraq, the Salvador Option Becomes Reality](#)' and '[Crying Wolf: Media Disinformation and Death Squads in Occupied Iraq](#)', both published by the Centre for Research on Globalisation. He is a member of the BRussells Tribunal Advisory Committee and he is an authority in the field of "[Death Squads](#)" and "[the Salvador Option](#)". He can be contacted via the website [www.cryingwolf.deconstructingiraq.org.uk](http://www.cryingwolf.deconstructingiraq.org.uk)

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