

The beheadings of Paul Johnson and Kim Sun-il

Barry Grey
23 June 2004

The beheadings of two hostages by Islamic jihadist terrorists within the space of five days are depraved actions that underscore the deeply reactionary nature of all those groups that associate themselves with Al Qaeda. The brutal and inhuman methods of these organizations bespeak not liberation, but provocation.

The killing of American contractor Paul M. Johnson Jr. in Saudi Arabia on June 18 and the murder of South Korean translator Kim Sun-il in Iraq on June 22 have this in common: these slayings were carried out in utter disregard for the sentiments not only of the victims' family members, who pleaded for mercy to no avail, but of millions of ordinary people in both the US and South Korea who oppose the militaristic policies of their respective governments and wish to see an end to the repression and violence inflicted on the peoples of the Middle East by the war cabal in Washington.

The fact that Johnson was employed by the US military contractor Lockheed Martin and worked on Apache helicopter systems for the Saudi monarchy, and Kim Sun-il worked for a South Korean firm that supplies goods to the US army, in no way justifies their murder, not to mention the gruesome manner in which the killings were carried out. In both cases, the killers proclaimed the murders to be retribution against the American and South Korean people as a whole, making no distinction between ordinary working people and the governments and ruling elites that oppress them.

On the same day that the Jama'at al-Tawhid and Jihad group, said to be led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, butchered the 33-year-old South Korean in Fallujah, the victim's countrymen marched in demonstrations across South Korea to denounce the policies of their government and demand the withdrawal of all South Korean troops from Iraq.

The killers themselves could not be unaware that the cruel and arbitrary murder of a young man could only sow revulsion and confusion in the ranks of the broad mass of people opposed to the war in Iraq and the other crimes of US imperialism. The struggle against imperialism is an international question, and actions that alienate working people around the world can only strengthen the hand of the imperialists.

Nor could they be oblivious to the immense crisis of the Bush administration, which is reeling from revelations of US torture, the exposure of all the lies it employed to generate support for the war, and the mounting toll of both American and Iraqi casualties. The murder of Kim Sun-il occurred on the very day a new *Washington*

Post poll was released showing a clear majority of Americans opposed to the war and a further erosion in Bush's approval rating. The beheading of the young Korean, who the day before was shown on national television pleading for his life, could only provide the Bush administration with a much-needed opportunity to pose as a defender of "human civilization."

The direct political service provided by the killers of Kim Sun-il to the Bush administration is further underscored by the site and timing of the deed. It took place in Fallujah, a center of Iraqi resistance to the American occupation, and the target in recent days of US bombings of civilian targets that have killed 25 Iraqis. Washington has justified these attacks as "precision strikes" against "safe houses" used by supporters of Zarqawi.

Tuesday's atrocity, carried out in the name of Zarqawi's organization, provides the Bush administration with a two-fold benefit: it serves to discredit the Iraqi resistance in the eyes of world public opinion, and diverts attention from the atrocities being carried out by the US military in Fallujah.

The actions of the Zarqawi group take place within the context of a genuine movement of mass resistance against the US occupation of Iraq. They stand out not as expressions of this movement, but rather as provocations that cut across its consolidation and expansion.

Last February, for example, amid signs that the majority Shiite population was on the verge of joining the armed resistance being fought mainly in Sunni Muslim areas, a letter was made public, authored, according to the US, by Zarqawi, calling for Sunnis to provoke a civil war against the Shiites. The Bush administration seized on this letter to argue that the US occupation was the only thing preventing a bloody descent into communal warfare in Iraq.

Several weeks later, on March 2, suicide bombings occurred at Shiite mosques in Karbala and Baghdad, killing scores of worshippers. Washington immediately blamed the atrocities on the "Zarqawi network."

Then in mid-May, as the scandal over torture at Abu Ghraib prison was breaking over the heads of Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney and company, hooded terrorists claiming allegiance to Zarqawi carried out the beheading of Nick Berg, providing the US government a desperately needed pretext for a propaganda counter-offensive. This murder took place under highly suspicious and still unexplained circumstances that suggest collaboration at some level between US authorities and those claiming to be followers of Zarqawi. Berg had been detained by US authorities in northern

Iraq and was released on April 6. He then traveled to Baghdad, only to disappear, evidently falling into the hands of his ultimate killers, just 72 hours after he had been released by American officials.

As with the Zarqawi group, the methods of Paul Johnson's killers, who call themselves Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, are indicative of the organization's outlook and aims. The beheading of the Lockheed employee and broadcast of pictures of his bloodied head on a jihadist web site were aimed at terrorizing American expatriates employed by the Saudi regime and the oil companies, and driving them out of the country. The goal is to undermine the dominant forces in the Saudi regime. But what perspective underlies this endeavor?

It is, in fact, far removed from that of social revolution. Rather, it is a variant of the nationalist perspective that seeks to replace one faction of the ruling elite with another.

In a recent analysis by Stratfor, a think tank with close ties to the American military and intelligence establishment, the authors spell out the fundamentally bourgeois perspective of Al Qaeda-linked groups in Saudi Arabia. Entitled "Al Qaeda's Strategic Goals," the article states that the aim of these groups is to "position leaders among the kingdom's tribal sheiks, business elite and senior military officers—as well as some members of the ruling House of Saud—who are sympathetic to Al Qaeda's world view and willing to support Al Qaeda's long-term goal."

The article goes on to say: "Al Qaeda does not want to trigger a US invasion or any other serious political backlash like a full-scale revolution or a fracturing of the country that would restrict Riyadh's political reach. If it can find a cooperative branch or a support base within the royal family, then the 'regime' could persist—at least in name—even as Riyadh's political orientation shifts."

Involved are not simply religious and political motives, but definite economic ones. As Stratfor states: "Ousting Westerners also opens thousands of positions in the energy and defense industries, positions Al Qaeda will hope to see filled with Saudis or other Muslims sympathetic to its world view."

The article goes on to cite a recent taped speech in which the speaker, believed to be Osama bin Laden, calls for the establishment of a new political leadership to replace the current Arab governments—one consisting of "honest...dignitaries, notables and merchants."

Watch David North's remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

That the actions of those responsible for the beheadings of Paul Johnson and Kim Sun-il play into the hands of imperialism and cut across the development of a politically conscious and international movement against war, as well as the liberation of the Saudi and Iraqi people, is neither accidental nor peculiar to these specific groups. Long historical experience has demonstrated that the methods of terrorist outrage, assassination and exemplary killings only perpetuate a political environment that facilitates mass violence by American imperialism against the peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East.

Moreover, by their very nature, such organizations are subject to massive infiltration and manipulation by intelligence agencies,

both foreign and domestic. It is impossible to determine where, within the ranks of such groups, reactionary politics leave off and direct provocation begins.

In the end, Al Qaeda and similar groups represent the interests, not of the working class and oppressed masses, but rather the ambitions and strivings of disaffected factions within the bourgeois ruling elites in the Arab and Muslim world. That is why they are organically hostile to the development of a revolutionary mass movement against imperialism and capitalism.

That said, it is necessary to deal with the response of the Bush administration to these outrages. The US president seized on both killings to denounce the perpetrators as "barbarians" and cite their deeds as justification for the so-called "war on terrorism," including the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Here it is appropriate to cite the aphorism: "It takes one to know one." Bush makes his sanctimonious statements even as the revelations of US torture in Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo and elsewhere pile up, and news reports emerge in bits and pieces of, in the words of Al Gore, an "American Gulag," consisting of secret concentration camps spread across the world. This self-appointed guardian of "the civilized world" refuses even to make an accounting of the tens of thousands of Iraqis killed in the course of the American subjugation of Iraq.

How is it possible for the supposed guarantor of human values to engender such indignation and hatred among the oppressed peoples of the Middle East as to create a pool of dispossessed youth open to the preachments of the likes of Osama bin Laden? Mr. Bush does not say.

There is another relevant issue on which Bush and the US media are silent. The barbaric methods employed by the killers of Paul Johnson, Kim Sun-il, Nick Berg, Daniel Pearl and others are not the invention of Al Qaeda. The practice of beheading both criminals and political opponents has for decades been employed by Washington's long-time ally in the Middle East, the Saudi monarchy. Where were the cries of indignation from American politicians and oil magnates when the lucrative profits of US oil companies were secured through the cutting off of fingers, hands and heads by the Saudi royal family?

Then there is Bush's personal role in overseeing the execution of well over a hundred prisoners during his tenure as governor of Texas.

It is difficult to conceive of anything more false and reactionary than the spectacle of this sadist, installed in office by the most predatory sections of the American ruling elite, posing as the spokesman of morality.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact