

Pentagon secretly investigated detainee deaths as homicides

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Not only did US forces torture and sexually assault Iraqi detainees but in some case they killed them outright, according to reports now surfacing in the press. US military investigators have investigated 37 deaths of detainees in Iraq and Afghanistan and concluded that nine were “suspicious.” Eight “homicides” were classified as “justified,” and therefore not “suspicious,” although at least one of these instances involves an Iraqi shot and killed while throwing stones at a US soldier during a prison riot.

Details in individual cases are coming to light, making homicide by US forces an increasingly inescapable conclusion. These include the cases of two Iraqi detainees classified by the occupation authority as “high-value”, i.e., linked to the previous regime of Saddam Hussein: General Abed Hamed Mowhoush and chemist Mohammed Alazmirli.

Mowhoush turned himself in to US forces for interrogation in November 2003. Basing itself on Pentagon documents, the *Denver Post* reports that Mowhoush was smothered in a sleeping bag and then beaten and suffocated. Mowhoush’s family believes that psychological torture may have also played a role in Mowhoush’s death—according to Iraqis detained with Mowhoush, US soldiers marched his teenage son into his cell, threatened to execute the son, and then took the son out of the cell and fired shots in the air. US soldiers also reportedly showed him blood on the floor to make him believe that his son had been executed.

The Pentagon’s press release at the time stated that, “Mowhoush said he didn’t feel well and subsequently lost consciousness ... According to the on-site surgeon, it appeared Mowhouse [sic] died of natural causes.” The Pentagon finalized an investigation into Mowhoush’s death in January 2004 and issued reprimands to Mowhoush’s interrogators. However, the *Post* reported that the commanding officers had taken no further action against the interrogators.

Alazmirli, a chemist cleared by the UN in the 1990s of involvement in Iraqi weapons programs, was detained in April 2004 by US forces, who surrounded his house with tanks and armored vehicles. US soldiers failed to find him, and took his books and his wife’s jewelry and perfume. Alazmirli returned home the next day and turned himself in. His wife, a high school chemistry teacher, tried to stay with him by saying she was also a chemist; US forces detained her but she was subsequently released. Alazmirli’s family was able to call him twice and visit him once before his death in January 2004; during the visit they learned that the US forces were denying insulin injections for the

chemist, who was a diabetic.

Alazmirli died on January 31 of “natural causes,” according to the US death certificate. US forces waited 17 days to deliver his body to an Iraqi morgue, where it was noted that Alazmirli’s corpse was badly bruised and had a fractured skull. Alazmirli’s family had an independent autopsy performed by Dr. Qaiss Hassan of Iraq’s Forensic Medical Institute, who found massive amounts of blood under Alazmirli’s scalp and concluded, “It was definitely a blunt-trauma injury. There’s no question. You can get this kind of injury if you are in a car accident or if you fall from a height or if someone hits your head hard.”

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, it is unclear whether Alazmirli’s death is counted among the 37 deaths mentioned by the Pentagon. Christopher Grey, an Army spokesman, responded to press inquiries on Alazmirli’s death with these words: “No releasable information at this time.”

Congressional Democrats and Republicans unanimously acceded to the Pentagon’s decision not to release an additional 1,800 photos of torture and sexual humiliation of Iraqis at US-run prisons. However, the *Washington Post* has published six of the hundreds of new photographs of Iraqis being tortured that it reported having obtained on May 21, as well as sworn testimony of Iraqi victims. The photos and statements document savage beatings, guards threatening prisoners with dogs, prisoners being sexually assaulted, smeared in foul substances or forced to eat out of toilets, and made to violate their religion by eating pork and drinking alcohol.

In an online chat session recorded on the *Post*’s web site, Executive Editor Leonard Downie, Jr. admitted that the *Post* had censored the most disturbing images: “Many of the images are so shocking ... that they are not publishable in our newspaper or on our Web site.”

According to NBC, the Pentagon has also secretly begun an investigation of torture by US Special Forces troops against Iraqi detainees at the Battlefield Interrogation Facility (BIF) near the Baghdad airport. NBC reported that detainees are kept hooded at all times and routinely drugged and held under water to make them think they will drown. When NBC contacted Pentagon spokesmen in Iraq, they refused to confirm or deny BIF’s existence.

The continuing exposure of US torture in Iraq also has led to repeated requests, both from the Reuters news agency and the international organization Reporters without Borders, that the US army investigate complaints by Iraqi Reuters employees that they

were tortured by US forces. The employees were covering a US helicopter crash near Fallujah in January when they were detained by US troops. They were beaten, sexually assaulted, and threatened with deportation to the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp. NBC reported that one of its Iraqi employees working with the Reuters employees was also detained and abused.

The fraudulent character of the Pentagon investigation of torture in Iraq was underscored by the revelations of Sergeant Samuel Provance, a systems analyst charged with the upkeep of computer systems at Abu Ghraib. Speaking on May 18 to the ABC television network, Provance described a massive cover-up of US torture in Iraq and gave more evidence of high-level responsibility for the Iraq torture policy. Significantly, he also revealed that Major General George Fay, who is heading the investigation into the Abu Ghraib abuses, tried to discourage him from making his revelations public.

According to Provance, during his meeting with Fay he “was made to feel that my testimony was unwelcome.” The Pentagon confirmed that it wanted Provance kept quiet by subsequently stripping him of his security clearance and threatening him with prosecution because his comments were “not in the national interest.” Provance was “flagged” (i.e., barred from promotions, awards, or honors), and barred from discussing the abuses with the media or “other government agencies” such as Congress, which is also holding hearings on the Abu Ghraib torture scandal.

Provance told ABC: “There’s definitely a cover-up. People are either telling themselves or being told to be quiet. ... The collective silence by so many people that had to be involved, that had to have seen something or heard something.” Provance told the Associated Press that humiliation and mistreatment of inmates “was not discussed because it was considered normal.”

Provance confirmed to the *Washington Post* that the military police at Abu Ghraib currently charged with torturing Iraqis were following the orders of military interrogators: “‘Setting the conditions’ for the interrogations was strictly dictated by military intelligence. They weren’t the ones carrying it out, but they were the ones telling the MPs to wake the detainees every hour on the hour or limiting their food.”

Meanwhile, press reports are confirming the report by Seymour Hersh in the *New Yorker* magazine that US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld set up a secret program and legal guidelines for torturing detainees in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, involving the US military high command in Iraq. So far, the Pentagon has denied Hersh’s story without attempting any factual refutation.

On May 21 “defense officials” confirmed to the *Washington Post* that Rumsfeld had personally approved the guidelines for torturing detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Pentagon spokesman Larry DiRita confirmed that Rumsfeld personally ordered and approved a revision of these guidelines in April 2003, at which point they still sanctioned the use of sleep deprivation, exposure to heat, cold, bright lights, and loud music, and “sensory assault.” The report also confirmed that General Geoffrey Miller oversaw their application at Guantanamo Bay and went to Iraq in order to extend the use of these methods to Iraq. Military officials still refuse to say precisely what techniques were allowed.

The *Post*’s May 23 report, “Prison Visits by General Reported

in Hearing,” further confirmed Hersh’s version of events, also directly implicating Major General Ricardo Sanchez, head of US military operations in Iraq. The *Post* interviewed General Janice Karpinski, the commanding officer at Abu Ghraib. Karpinski told the *Post* that a flood of intelligence officers and resources, together with several visits by Sanchez, arrived at Abu Ghraib after the August 31-September 9, 2003 visit by General Geoffrey Miller. Karpinski confirmed that Miller told her he wanted to “Gitmo-ize” Abu Ghraib—i.e., to extend to Iraq the torture methods used to extract confessions from detainees at the concentration camp in the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The documented abuses of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib began in October 2003.

The *Post* report focused on evidence that Sanchez had witnessed the torture of Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison. Although the *Post* did not stress this point, its report shows that military authorities were informed of this on April 2 and hid it from the public for nearly two months.

The *Post* obtained transcripts of an April 2 military hearing on the role of Staff Sergeant Ivan Frederick, a prison guard at Abu Ghraib, and of the motions by Frederick’s military lawyer, Captain Robert Shuck. Shuck wanted the court to grant immunity to Captain Donald Reese so that Reese could testify. Under questioning from the military prosecutor, Captain John McCabe, Shuck revealed that Reese was willing to testify that General Sanchez visited Abu Ghraib and witnessed torture going on there, in exchange for immunity. Reese has apparently refused to testify thus far, citing the military equivalent of his Fifth Amendment right to avoid self-incrimination. Reese has not yet been granted immunity.

On May 25 Pentagon officials announced that Sanchez would be relieved of duty in Iraq at the end of June. During a photo-op, President Bush briefly praised Sanchez’s work in Iraq and refused to answer questions.



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