

# Journalist killed after investigating US-backed death squads in Iraq

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On June 24, Yasser Salihee, an Iraqi special correspondent for the news agency Knight Ridder, was killed by a single bullet to the head as he approached a checkpoint that had been thrown up near his home in western Baghdad by US and Iraqi troops. It is believed that the shot was fired by an American sniper. According to eyewitnesses, no warning shots were fired.

The US military has announced it is conducting an investigation into Salihee's killing. Knight Ridder has already declared, however, that "there's no reason to think that the shooting had anything to do with his reporting work". In fact, his last assignment gives reason to suspect that it was.

Over the past month, Salihee had been gathering evidence that US-backed Iraqi forces have been carrying out extra-judicial killings of alleged members and supporters of the anti-occupation resistance. His investigation followed a feature in the *New York Times* magazine in May, detailing how the US military had modeled the Iraqi interior ministry police commandos, known as the Wolf Brigade, on the death squads unleashed in the 1980s to crush the left-wing insurgency in El Salvador.

The Wolf Brigade was recruited by US operatives and the US-installed interim government headed by Iyad Allawi during 2004. A majority of its officers and personnel served in Saddam Hussein's special forces and Republican Guard—veterans of killings, torture and repression. The unit has been used against the resistance in rebellious cities such as Mosul and Samarra, and, over the past six weeks, has played a prominent role in the massive crackdown ordered by the Iraqi government in Baghdad codenamed "Operation Lightning".

On June 27, Knight Ridder published the results of its inquiry in an article jointly written by Salihee and correspondent Tom Lasseter. The journalists "found more than 30 examples in less than a week" of corpses turning up in Baghdad morgues of people who were last seen being detained by the police commandos.

The men, according to the central Baghdad morgue director Faik Baqr, had "been killed in a methodical fashion". The article reported: "Their hands had been tied or handcuffed behind their backs, their eyes were blindfolded and they appeared to have been tortured. In most cases, the dead men looked as if they'd been whipped with a cord, subjected to electric shocks or beaten with a blunt object and shot to death, often with single bullets to their heads."

A grocer in west Baghdad told Salihee that he had been detained by police with a man named Anwar Jassim on May 13. "When we

were in detention, they put blindfolds and handcuffs on us. On the second day the soldiers were saying 'He's dead'. Later we found out it was Anwar." According to the medical reports at the Yarmuk morgue where police dumped his body, Jassim had a "bullet wound in the back of his head and cuts and bruises on his abdomen, back and neck."

Police commandos reportedly told the morgue director to leave the corpse "so that dogs could eat it, because he's terrorist and he deserves it".

In a second case, a brigadier-general in the Iraqi interior ministry related that his brother had been detained during a raid on May 14, in a working class Sunni suburb in Baghdad's west. His body was found the next day bearing signs of torture. Witnesses told the general that the abductors "came in white police Toyota Land Cruisers, wore police commando uniforms, flak vests and helmets" and were armed with 9mm Glock pistols.

Glock sidearms are used by many US law enforcement agencies and have been supplied to Iraqi security forces by the US military.

The article also cited a third case. The body of Saadi Khalif was brought to Yarmuk morgue by police commandos several days after he was taken from his home by police on June 10. Saadi's brother told Knight Ridder: "The doctor told us he was choked and tortured before they shot him. He looked like he had been dragged by a car."

An article in the British *Financial Times* on June 29 provided further evidence of police commando atrocities. Mustafa Mohammed Ali, from the western Baghdad suburb of Abu Ghraib, told the newspaper he was detained by the Wolf Brigade on May 22, during the build-up to Operation Lightning. He alleged that he was held for 26 days.

The article reported: "He spent the first day in a barbed wire enclosure with hundreds of other detainees, without food, water or toilet facilities... On the fourth day, the interrogations began. Mr Ali says Wolf Brigade commandos attached electrical wires to his ear and his genitals, and generated a current with a hand-cranked military telephone."

According to the figures given to the *Financial Times*, only 22 of the 474 people seized from their homes during the Wolf Brigade sweep in the Abu Ghraib area are still being held. Those released allege they suffered systematic abuse. "Mass detentions and indiscriminate torture seem to be the main tools deployed to crush an insurgency that could last 'five, six, eight, 10, 12 years' according to Donald Rumsfeld, US defence secretary," the

newspaper commented.

In light of the evidence gathered by Salihee, significant discrepancies in the official figures for Operation Lightning in Baghdad raise further concerns about the fate of detainees. In early June, the Iraqi government reported that 1,200 had been detained. Just days later on June 6, this was revised downward to just 887, with no explanation. Some of the deaths referred to in the Knight Ridder article coincide with this period.

The revelations about the conduct of the Wolf Brigade lend credibility to the claims made by Max Fuller, in a feature headlined “For Iraq, ‘The Salvador Option’ Becomes Reality” and published by the Centre for Research on Globalisation.

Over the past nine months, a terrifying new development in Iraq has been the discovery of dozens of bodies dumped in rubbish heaps, rivers or abandoned buildings. In most cases, the people had suffered torture and mutilation before being killed by a single shot to the head. The US military has consistently reported that the victims were members of the Iraqi army or police. The media has universally reported the mass killings as the work of anti-occupation terrorists.

Fuller noted, however: “What is particularly striking is that many of those killings have taken place since the police commandos became operationally active and often correspond with areas where they have been deployed.”

In Mosul, for example, dozens of men were detained by the commandos last November, as part of a US-led operation to bring the city back under occupation control. Over the following weeks, more than 150 tortured and executed bodies were found. In Samarra, dozens of bodies appeared in nearby Lake Thartar in the wake of operations by the commandos in that city.

From February through to late April, more than 100 bodies were recovered from the Tigris River south of Baghdad—one of the most rebellious areas of the country. The Iraqi government initially claimed they were villagers who had been kidnapped by insurgents in the village of Maidan. This has since been discredited. The victims are from a range of towns and villages, including Kut in the north and Basra in the south. Police in the area told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that many of the dead had been “motorists passing through the area when stopped by masked men bearing Kalashnikov rifles at impromptu checkpoints”.

Other killings have been discovered in Baquaba and the Syrian border town of Qaim in the aftermath of counter-insurgency operations by US forces and their Iraqi allies. Fuller also noted the suspicions surrounding the assassination of well over 200 university academics, most of whom were opponents of the US occupation of Iraq.

Dozens of bodies have been found over the past two months in Baghdad. In May, the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS)—the main public Sunni organisation opposed to the occupation—directly accused the Wolf Brigade of having “arrested imams and the guardians of some mosques, tortured and killed them, and then got rid of their bodies in a garbage dump in Shaab district” of Baghdad. AMS secretary general Hareth al-Dhari declared at the time: “This is state terrorism by the Minister of the Interior.”

The very existence of the Wolf Brigade underscores the criminality of the US occupation and the utter fraud of the Bush

administration claims to be bringing “liberation” and “democracy” to Iraq. Many of the commandos would have been involved in murder and torture on behalf of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The American military deliberately recruited them in order to make use of their experience in mass repression and has directly modeled their operations on those of right-wing death squads in Central America.

The main US advisor to the Wolf Brigade from the time of its formation until April 2005 was James J. Steele. Steele’s own biography, promoting him for the US lecture circuit, states that “he commanded the US military group in El Salvador during the height of the guerilla war” and “was credited with training and equipping what was acknowledged to be the best counter-terrorist force in the region”. In a 12-year campaign of murder and repression, the Salvadoran units, trained and advised by people like Steele, killed over 70,000 people.

In his speech on June 28, George Bush declared his administration was working with the Iraqi interior and defence ministries to “improve their capabilities to coordinate anti-terrorist operations” and “develop their command and control structures”. The evidence is beginning to emerge that this means paying and equipping former Baathist killers to terrorise, torture and murder Iraqis who are believed to have links to the popular resistance, which an unnamed US analyst estimated for the June 27 edition of *Newsweek* had “as many as 400,000 auxiliaries and support personnel”.

The killing of journalists seeking to document or expose allegations of state-organised murder has accompanied every dirty war against a civilian population. Since the US occupation of Iraq began, dozens of reporters, cameramen and other media workers have been killed by American-led forces in suspicious circumstances that were never independently investigated.

Two more Iraqi journalists have been killed in the days since Yasser Salihee’s death. On June 26, Maha Ibrahim, a news editor with a television station operated by the anti-occupation Iraqi Islamic Party, was shot dead when US troops opened fire on her car as she and her husband drove to work. Two days later, Ahmad Wail Bakri, a program director for Iraqi al-Sharqiya television was killed by American troops as he reportedly tried to drive around a traffic accident in Baghdad.



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