

US lies and murder in Iraq: the killing of Maj. Gen. Mowhoush

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Wednesday's *Washington Post* carried a front-page exposé of the torture and murder of a captured Iraqi Republican Guard general by US military forces in November of 2003. The article, written by *Post* staff reporter Josh White and headlined "Documents Tell of Brutal Improvisation by GIs," gives a detailed account, based on military court records, interviews and classified documents leaked to the newspaper, of the brutalization and eventual killing of Maj. Gen. Abed Hamed Mowhoush.

The US military considered Mowhoush a major figure in the armed resistance to the American occupation in northwestern Iraq. In the course of his interrogation, he was severely and repeatedly beaten by Iraqi paramilitaries, code-named Scorpions, working with the CIA and Army interrogators, and on November 26, 2003 he was stuffed into a sleeping bag by an Army interrogator and military guard and wrapped with an electrical cord. The Baathist general died while confined in the sleeping bag, the Army interrogator standing over his expiring body.

It is worthwhile quoting the opening passages of the *Post* article, which describe the crime with chilling terseness:

"Iraqi Maj. Gen. Abed Hamed Mowhoush was being stubborn with his American captors, and a series of intense beatings and creative interrogation tactics were not enough to break his will. On the morning of Nov. 26, 2003, a US Army interrogator and a military guard grabbed a green sleeping bag, stuffed Mowhoush inside, wrapped him in an electrical cord, laid him on the floor and began to go to work. Again.

"It was inside the sleeping bag that the 56-year-old detainee took his last breath through broken ribs, lying on the floor beneath a US soldier in Interrogation Room 6 in the western Iraqi desert. Two days before, a secret CIA-sponsored group of Iraqi paramilitaries, working with Army interrogators, had beaten Mowhoush senseless, using fists, a club and a rubber hose, according to classified documents."

The *Post* account makes the case that the torture and murder of Mowhoush cannot be written off as the actions of low-level "rogue elements" within the US military or the CIA. The methods of torture and abuse that led to his death had been approved by military commanders, who were, in turn, taking their cue from policies approved by top Pentagon and Bush

administration officials and practices initiated at the US prison camp at Guantanamo Bay and employed at the Abu Ghraib prison and other US facilities in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

In the months leading up to Mowhoush's detention, the article states, US military intelligence officials in Iraq "had been discussing interrogation tactics, expressing a desire to ramp things up and expand their allowed techniques to include more severe methods, such as beatings that did not leave permanent damage, and exploiting detainees' fear of dogs and snakes, according to documents released by the Army."

It continues: "Officials in Baghdad wrote an e-mail to interrogators in the field on Aug. 14, 2003, stating that the 'gloves are coming off' and asking them to develop 'wish lists' of tactics they would like to use."

The article notes that the same personnel, American and Iraqi, who interrogated Mowhoush at desert locations near the Syrian border interrogated 350 Iraqi detainees who had been arrested in a series of massive raids in which US troops searched more than 8,000 homes in three cities.

At the so-called Blacksmith Hotel, where these captives were held and interrogated by teams of Army Special Forces soldiers and the CIA, and where Mowhoush was killed, the *Post* reports:

"[T]here was a tiered system of interrogations. Army interrogators were the first level. When Army efforts produced nothing useful, detainees would be handed over to members of Operational Detachment Alpha 531, soldiers with the 5th Special Forces Group, the CIA or a combination of the three. 'The personnel were dressed in civilian clothes and wore balaclavas to hide their identity,' according to a Jan. 18, 2004 report for the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division.

"If they did not get what they wanted, the interrogators would deliver the detainees to a small team of the CIA-sponsored Iraqi paramilitary squads, code-named Scorpions, according to a military source familiar with the operation..."

"Sometimes, soldiers and intelligence officers used the mere existence of the paramilitary unit as a threat to induce detainees to talk, one Army soldier said in an interview. 'Detainees knew that if they went to those people, bad things would happen,' the soldier said. 'It was used as a motivator to get them to talk. They didn't want to go with the masked men.'"

The article substantiates that the methods used on Mowhoush were widely employed against other detainees. It notes that at a preliminary court hearing in March for three of the soldiers implicated in Mowhoush's killing, a former interrogator who had worked in Iraq with Mowhoush's interrogator, Chief Warrant Officer Lewis E. Welshofer Jr., testified that using the sleeping bag and putting detainees in a wall locker and banging on it were "appropriate" techniques that he himself used on detainees.

Col. David A. Teeple, who then commanded the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, told the court he believed the "claustrophobic technique" was both approved and effective. "It was used before, and for some time after, Mowhoush's death, according to sources familiar with the interrogation operation," the *Post* reports.

The death of Mowhoush, a well-known figure in Saddam Hussein's military, could not be hidden by US officials. The same cannot be said for the hundreds of others subjected to US "interrogation" at Hotel Blacksmith. Is there any reason to assume that others did not suffer a similar fate?

The *Post* report further documents the lies and cover-ups employed by the military to conceal the real reasons for Mowhoush's death and the role of the CIA and its Iraqi unit.

It notes that hours after Mowhoush's death, military officials issued a news release stating that he had died of natural causes after complaining of feeling sick. It further reports that the death certificate listed his cause of death as "asphyxia due to smothering and chest compression," but that the December 2, 2003 autopsy, "quoted in classified documents and released with redactions," showed that Mowhoush had "contusions and abrasions with pattern impressions" over much of his body, and six fractured ribs.

"Investigators believed," writes author Josh White, that "a 'long straight-edge instrument' was used on Mowhoush, as well as an 'object like the end of an M-16' rifle."

The article explains that during an interrogation two days before his death, US soldiers "heard Mowhoush 'being beaten with a hard object' and heard him 'screaming' from down the hall, according to the Jan. 18, 2004 provost marshal's report. The report said four Army guards had to carry Mowhoush back to his cell."

As for the role of the CIA and its Scorpions unit, the article states: "The CIA has tried hard to conceal the existence of the Scorpions. CIA classification officials have monitored pretrial hearings in the case and have urged the court to close much of the hearing on national security grounds. Redacted transcripts were released only after lawyers for the *Denver Post* challenged the rulings.

"The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology's standard 'Autopsy Examination Report' of Mowhoush's death was manipulated to avoid references to the CIA ... under 'Circumstances of Death,' the form says: 'This Iraqi [redacted] died while in US custody. The details surrounding

the circumstances at the time of death are classified.'"

Another lie given out by the military concealed an aspect of Mowhoush's case that underscores the savagery of his captors. The military initially told reporters that Mowhoush had been seized during a raid. "In reality," the article explains, "he had walked into the Forward Operating Base 'Tiger' in Qaim on November 10, 2003, hoping to speak with US commanders to secure the release of his sons, who had been arrested in raids 11 days earlier."

Two Army officers with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment at Fort Carson, Colorado are charged with killing Mowhoush by stuffing him into the sleeping bag, and partially open military court proceedings have taken place at the base in Colorado Springs. Separate courts martial for Chief Warrant Officer Welshofer, the interrogator, and Chief Warrant Officer Jeff Williams, an intelligence analyst, are scheduled to begin in October and November, respectively.

Two others who were present when Mowhoush was killed, Spec. Jerry L. Loper, the guard who actually put Mowhoush into the sleeping bag, and Sgt. 1st Class William Sommer, a linguist who stood nearby, have not been referred for trial, and may or may not face non-judicial sanctions.

The CIA inspector general's office has launched an investigation of at least one CIA operative who identified himself to soldiers only as "Brian." According to the *Post*, classified email messages and reports reveal that "Brian," a Special Forces retiree, worked as a CIA operative with the Scorpions.

These men deserve to be severely punished for their crimes. But they are not the primary authors of the murder of Mowhoush, and his torture and death are not a mere aberration. The methods used against him go to the essence of the illegal and imperialist war in Iraq.

The *Post*'s account of the killing of Mowhoush is but the latest sickening revelation of Nazi-style crimes being carried out by the American military and CIA in Guantánamo, Afghanistan and Iraq. It stands out because it provides a detailed and concrete picture of the atrocities being carried out in the name of the American people.



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