British military investigator found hung in Basra

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A senior British military police officer in Iraq, Captain Ken Masters, was found hung in his military accommodation in Basra on October 15.

Masters was commander of the Royal Military Police's Special Investigations Branch (SIB), charged with investigating allegations of mistreatment of Iraqi civilians by British soldiers. According to the *Independent* newspaper, in this capacity Masters "had examined almost every single serious allegation of abuse of Iraqi civilians by British troops," including "the cases of the fusiliers convicted of abusing prisoners at Camp Breadbasket near Basra and a paratrooper who has been charged in connection with the death of Baha Mousa, a hotel receptionist."

In recent weeks, Masters was thought to have been involved in the investigation into the events of September 19, when Iraqi police arrested two British undercover Special Air Service (SAS) officers in Basra.

According to the BBC, the SAS men were disguised as Arabs and were travelling in an unmarked car containing "weapons, explosives and communications gear" when they were challenged at an Iraqi security checkpoint.

The two opened fire, reportedly killing one person and wounding several others, including police officers, before they were taken into Iraqi custody. In response, the British Army launched a military assault on the facility in which the SAS men were being held, demolishing parts of the building. Several Iraqis were killed and wounded during the attack.

In a statement on Masters' death, Britain's Ministry of Defence said the "circumstances were not regarded as suspicious." The only explanation offered as a justification for suggesting that Masters took his own life is that he was suffering due to the stresses of his job.

Such explanations are problematic in any circumstances, but more so given the politically sensitive nature of Masters' work.

Masters, aged 40, had 24 years' experience in the British Army. Married with two children, he was due to return to Britain in just two weeks. Reports indicate that he had displayed no signs of stress or illness and that no suicide notes were found at the scene. The *Mirror* newspaper cited "senior military sources and colleagues" in Basra saying that his death had been a "devastating surprise."

Moreover, Masters' death is only the latest in a series of suspicious incidents in Basra surrounding the September 19 conflict provoked by the arrest of the two SAS officers. Numerous sources have questioned whether the two men were acting as agents provocateurs.

Writing for the Globalresearch web site, Michel Chossudovsky states, "Several media reports and eyewitness accounts suggested that the SAS operatives were disguised as Al Qaeda 'terrorists' and were planning to set off the bombs in Basra's central square during a major religious event."

He cites an interview broadcast by the Arab news channel *Al Jazeera* with Fattah al-Shaykh, a member of the Iraqi National Assembly, denouncing "British provocations" in Basra.

The SAS men were in "a booby-trapped car laden with ammunition" that "was meant to explode in the centre of the city of Basra," before they were arrested, al-Shaykh claimed. The British Army's attack on the prison facility was aimed at concealing the nature of the SAS officers' operation, he continued.

In another report, *Al Jazeera* quoted Sheik Hassan al-Zarqani, a spokesman for the Mehdi army led by Moqtada al-Sadr, stating, "We believe these soldiers were planning an attack on a market or other civilian targets."

The news agency continued, "If allegations that the soldiers' car was loaded with explosives are proved, this will strengthen the theory suggesting that British and American intelligence are involved in the persistent and violent acts of 'terror' spreading across Iraq, which means that the current 'counterinsurgency' efforts involve the premeditated killing of innocent civilians to achieve US policy objectives."

Basra officials have reportedly called for the two Britons to face an espionage trial.

Initial reports in Britain on the SAS officers' arrest had claimed that the two were working undercover to root out Iranian-backed "terrorists" who were using sophisticated bombs to kill British soldiers. The subsequent army assault on the Jamiyat prison was justified with the claim that the captured SAS officers had been handed over by prison staff to local militias and that the militias had heavily infiltrated Basra's police.

This official version of events was amended by army sources around the same time as Masters died to explicitly link the activities of the two SAS officers to the stormed prison facility. The *Sunday Telegraph*, October 16, published a report based on unnamed "military sources" claiming that "the real story" behind the SAS men's undercover operation was that they had been spying on "several members of the Iraqi police, who were believed to be responsible for torturing prisoners at the notorious Jamiyat

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prison in Basra."

The operation "was compromised on September 19 when the SAS team became involved in a shoot-out with four plain-clothed police officers just as they were about to withdraw from the surveillance operation," it continued.

Subsequent news reports have uncritically repeated the *Telegraph's* story, without making any account for the initial army claims as to what the two SAS officers were doing. Nor has there been any explanation offered as to why an undercover surveillance operation would involve weapons and explosives.

The revised account has only fuelled suspicion of dirty tricks.

Chossudovsky questions whether the British military were "blocking Captain Masters' police investigation," citing a report by the *Independent* newspaper of "apparent disagreements between British military commanding officers and the military police officials dispatched to the war theater in charge of investigating the actions and behavior of military personnel."

Last week, it emerged that Attorney General Lord Goldsmith had warned that leading British officers had made a "concerted attempt" to block an investigation into the killing of Sergeant Steven Roberts, who was shot dead after he was told to hand in his body armour due to equipment shortages.

According to the *Independent* of October 18, "Lord Goldsmith revealed that he felt it necessary to move the case to the civilian jurisdiction and said Sgt. Roberts' case was one example of why top commanders might not be trusted to handle murder investigations."

In addition, the October 16 *Independent on Sunday* revealed that eight British soldiers killed in ambushes in Iraq were the victims of bombs "developed by the IRA using technology passed on by the security services in a botched 'sting' operation more than a decade ago."

Citing anonymous military personnel, the newspaper continued, "the bombs and the firing devices used to kill the soldiers, as well as two private security guards, were initially created by the UK security services as part of a counter-terrorism strategy at the height of the troubles in the early 1990s.

"According to investigators examining past collusion between the security forces and paramilitaries in Northern Ireland, members of the shadowy army undercover outfit, the Force Research Unit, and officers from MI5 learned in the early 1990s that a senior IRA member in south Armagh was working to develop bombs triggered by light beams. They decided the risks would be diminished if they knew what technology was being used.

"'The thinking of the security forces was that if they were intimate with the technology, then they could develop counter-measures, thereby staying one step ahead of the IRA,' a senior source close to the inquiry explained. 'It may seem absurd that the security services were supplying technology to the IRA, but the strategy was sound.

"'Unfortunately, no one could see back then that this technology would be used to kill British soldiers thousands of miles away in a different war.'"

For the *Independent*, revelations of an IRA pedigree for the bombs was significant because it contradicted the Blair government's claims that Iran had been working with insurgents in Basra to make the devices.

But they raise another important question as to how such bombs have turned up in Iraq. The *Independent* suggests the route was directly between the IRA and Palestinian and/or other Middle Eastern groups. However, this is not the only possible explanation, given the involvement of British security forces in dirty tricks operations in Ireland and their alleged role in developing the bomb in question.

Yet another incident has yet to be explained. On October 4 it was reported that a British civilian and nine Iraqis had been arrested by Iraq's border security force. An Iraqi police official in Najaf told CNN that the "ten suspected terrorists" had been arrested near the Saudi border the day before.

The group were reportedly travelling in three GMC Suburbans containing machine guns and GPS satellite technology when they were stopped. The Briton, Colin Peter Wanley, had claimed to be a contractor, but was briefly detained after his identification failed to support this.

Wanley was said to be working on bomb disposal at a water treatment plant in southern Iraq for his UK-based firm, Ammtech International Consultants Ltd. Subsequent reports indicate that Wanley had served in the British Army for 12 years in Northern Ireland before leaving to set up his company, and had previously been involved in "humanitarian" work in Bosnia.

Why an engineer should be in possession of an invalid visa, let alone Kalashnikov rifles and satellite navigation equipment, has never been revealed. Nor has the nature of Wanley's relations with the nine Iraqis detained with him.

Instead, media coverage of the incident quickly fell silent.

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