

US-backed government in Iraq: “The same as Saddam’s time and worse”

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Former Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi’s recent declaration that the extent of human rights abuses in Iraq is the “same” as under Saddam Hussein is a devastating indictment of all those, including Allawi himself, who planned, organised and collaborated with the illegal US conquest of Iraq.

The invasion of March 2003, which the Bush administration cynically codenamed “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” is responsible for creating a nightmare of death squads, torture chambers, random bombings and fratricidal sectarian violence.

Allawi told the British-based *Observer* on Sunday: “People are doing the same as Saddam’s time and worse. It is an appropriate comparison. People are remembering the days of Saddam. These were the precise reasons that we fought Saddam and now we are seeing the same things. We are hearing about secret police, secret bunkers where people are being interrogated. A lot of Iraqis are being tortured or killed in the course of interrogations. We are even witnessing Sharia courts based on Islamic law that are trying people and executing them.”

The statement was made following the recent exposure of a torture centre operated by the Iraqi government and amid daily reports of extra-judicial killings or “disappearances” by government security forces. This week, two Sunni Arab politicians from the Iraqi Islamic Party were gunned down in their car in Baghdad, while in Basra, the body of a Sunni cleric, who had been seized by government security forces, was found dumped in a cemetery.

There is now a steady stream of accounts in the international media accusing the security forces of the US-backed regime in Baghdad of waging a dirty war against their opponents.

The November 20 edition of the English-language Iraqi journal *Azzaman* carried a comment headlined “Welcome to the chambers of death”. Its author wrote: “Mutilated bodies thrown on roadsides and garbage dumps have become a common sight.... Death counts have lost their significance with fatal incidents, bombings and trigger-happy militia gangs killing hundreds and even thousands every week. In the midst of this horror, assassinations of Iraqi professionals, former army officers, Baathists, clerics and Iraqis of note continue with impunity....”

The *New York Times* featured an article on November 29 headlined “Sunnis accuse Iraqi military of kidnappings and slayings”. The article reported that the Um al-Qura mosque in Baghdad had compiled the names of 700 Sunni men who have disappeared or been killed in just the past four months.

Los Angeles Times also ran a lengthy feature on November 29, based on interviews with over 40 US and Iraqi officials, human rights observers and morgue officials. The article alleged that loyalists of two Shiite militias had effectively taken over the interior ministry police and regular police units in a number of Iraqi cities, and were using the security forces to “consolidate political power and intimidate opponents”.

The Iranian-trained Badr Organisation militia of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), one of the key parties in the government, is accused of controlling the interior ministry and operating death squads across the country. The interior minister is Bayan Jabr, a SCIRI leader. Since his appointment in May, hundreds of Badr members are alleged to have joined the ministry intelligence and police commando units.

The article accused the Mahdi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr of controlling 90 percent of the 35,000-strong police force in northeast Baghdad, enforcing Islamic law and carrying out executions. This follows earlier charges against the Sadrists. American journalist Steven Vincent was murdered in Basra on August 2, after reporting that the Mahdi Army dominated sections of the police in Basra, Iraq’s second largest city, and was responsible for extra-judicial killings.

Last year the Sadrist movement fought major battles against the US military across southern Iraq and in Baghdad. Since a ceasefire was negotiated September 2004, however, it has worked ever more closely with the occupation forces. In the elections in January, supporters of Sadr took part in the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition with SCIRI and the Da’awa Party of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. In the coming election, the Sadrists will comprise as many as one-third of the UIA’s candidates.

An unnamed high-ranking US military officer told the *Los Angeles Times*: “The Mahdi Army’s got the Iraqi police and Badr’s got the commandos. Everybody’s got their own death squads.”

The revelations make clear that nothing remotely resembling a democracy is emerging in Iraq. There is more than an element of hypocrisy, however, in the US military and Iyad Allawi, an ex-Baathist thug and longtime CIA asset, accusing the Iraqi government of human rights abuses. Apart from the evidence of indiscriminate killings by the US military and torture in US-run prisons, the present dirty war was initiated by the occupation forces following Allawi’s installation as interim prime minister on May 31, 2004.

During Allawi's administration, US advisors who had worked with right-wing paramilitaries in Latin America directed the recruitment of thousands of former members of Hussein's Republican Guard into the interior ministry police commandos. Reports in *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* on the initial formation of the commando units established that their activities were modelled on the American-sponsored "counter-insurgency" operations in El Salvador. Their mission was labelled the "Salvador option"—unleashing terror against the population in areas of the country where support is strongest for the guerilla insurgency against the US occupation.

The commandos were first used in Mosul during the uprising that took place in Sunni areas of the city following the US military's bloodbath in Fallujah in November last year. Since then, they have been extensively deployed in other volatile parts of the country. Invariably, their operations have been accompanied by reports of disappearances and killings. These activities are not only directed by the US military and intelligence agencies, but American special forces troops are embedded in their ranks.

As for Allawi, he has been accused of personal involvement in extra-judicial killings. Two eyewitnesses interviewed by Australian journalist Paul McGeough of the *Sydney Morning Herald* alleged that Allawi shot dead six prisoners in mid-June 2004 in an interior ministry prison, in front of his American bodyguards. Allawi boasted he carried out the executions to show the police how "to deal with" suspected members of the anti-occupation insurgency. Several weeks later, US National Guard troops discovered prisoners being tortured in a facility operated by Allawi's interior ministry personnel and were ordered by their commanders to ignore it.

On April 29, 2005, Allawi's interim government was replaced with the current governing coalition between the Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties that supported the US invasion. However, the growing reports of extra-judicial killings have had less to do with the formation of the new regime, than with the growing crisis of the American-led occupation forces. This year has witnessed a continuing toll of American casualties, steadily eroding support for the war in the US.

Media reportage of the death squad operations has appeared in the lead up to the December 15 election. The primary aim of US officials and figures like Allawi in implicating the Iraqi government is not to stop the human rights abuses, but to undermine the position of the Shiite fundamentalist parties. The Bush administration would prefer that the next government in Baghdad, which will hold office for four years, be controlled by one of Washington's more reliable puppets.

A campaign is unfolding to supplant the Shiite alliance with a new coalition assembled from the Kurdish nationalists, Sunni-based parties that are now prepared to work with the occupation, and secular, pro-US Shiites such as Allawi or Ahmed Chalabi.

Washington's animosity toward SCIRI is primarily due to its close links with the Iranian regime, a potential new target of US aggression. The Iranian connection is also a factor in fuelling Iraqi nationalist opposition and armed resistance to the occupation.

The US is even more reluctant to work with the followers of Moqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrist movement is a heterogeneous and

inherently unstable combination. It is led by clerics and political powerbrokers seeking positions for themselves, but its social base includes workers and urban poor in the major cities who are intensely hostile to the US drive to plunder the country's resources.

The tensions between Washington and SCIRI came into the open last weekend. In an interview on Sunday, SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz Hakim labelled the reports of torture and death squads as "baseless allegations" and claimed that American troops had been visiting the prison discovered in Baghdad "four times a week". Hakim accused the US of "major interference, and preventing the forces of the interior or defence ministries from carrying out tasks they are capable of doing, and also in the way they deal with the terrorists".

The Bush administration has pleaded ignorance of any human rights abuses by the Iraqi government and rejected any responsibility. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told a press conference on November 29: "What you're talking about are unverified—to my knowledge, at least—unverified comments. I just don't have any data from the field that I could comment on in a specific way."

Rumsfeld went on to declare: "Obviously, the United States does not have a responsibility when a sovereign country engages in something that they disapprove of."

It is simply not credible that death squads and torture chambers are being operated by US-created and advised security forces without the knowledge of the US military command, US intelligence agencies or the White House. The campaign of terror is in line with other US activities to subjugate the country, such as the recent offensives in western Iraq. The victims—whether of American bombs or extra-judicial killings—are mainly opponents of the Bush administration's agenda of permanently stationing troops in Iraq and selling off its oil industry to US-based energy conglomerates.

Even if some atrocities have been carried out without the direct sanction of American forces, the US government and its allies still bear full political and legal responsibility. The "sovereignty" of the Baghdad government is a fig leaf. The country is occupied by more than 200,000 US troops, allied military forces and private mercenaries, and American advisors are inserted in every ministry.

The invasion of Iraq has already produced war crime after war crime by US imperialism and its allies. The inevitable outcome of a continuing occupation will be ever-greater violence against the Iraqi people.



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