Second defence lawyer assassinated

More accusations of US-backed death squads in Iraq

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A second member of the legal team defending Saddam Hussein and seven others in the upcoming November 28 war crimes trial was assassinated on Tuesday. His colleagues have immediately accused death squads operating under the direction of the US-backed Iraqi government of responsibility and have boycotted all further cooperation with the court.

Adel al-Zubeidi, the lawyer representing former Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan, and Thamer Hamoud al-Khuzaie, the attorney for Hussein's half-brother and former head of the Iraqi secret police, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, were fired on from speeding vehicles as they drove through a Baghdad suburb. Zubeidi was killed, while Khuzaie was wounded.

On October 20, just 24 hours after the conclusion of the first session of the Hussein trial, defence lawyer Sadoun Antar Nudsaif al-Janabi was seized from his Baghdad office by masked men who witnesses claim were wearing uniforms and identified themselves as interior ministry police. His body was found dumped on the street several hours later with two gunshots to the head.

Khalil al-Dulaimi, the head of the defence team and the attorney for Saddam Hussein, told Al Jazeera that Tuesday's assassination was also carried out by "an armed group using government vehicles". He declared the "aim of these organised attacks is to scare Arab and foreign lawyers" into not challenging the legitimacy of the trial, which has been denounced as "victors' justice" and a "show-trial" by observers and commentators.

The Iraqi government of Shiite fundamentalist Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari has dismissed as absurd the allegations that the interior ministry is behind the killings. It has claimed that supporters of the previous regime, seeking to prevent the Hussein trial from going ahead, are most likely responsible.

However, there is now a mass of accusations that government-linked death squads are killing opponents of the US occupation of Iraq and its puppet regime in Baghdad. Over the past year, the list of those assassinated include anti-occupation politicians and clerics; human rights advocates such as Margaret Hassan; journalists exposing the war crimes carried out by American and Iraqi government forces; and literally hundreds of men from areas of the country where there is popular support for the guerilla resistance movements.

On November 7, the British *Telegraph* published another description of the mass killings taking place in Baghdad. On average, close to 1,000 victims of a violent death are brought to the capital's main morgue per month. The greatest cause of death is gunshot wounds. The *Telegraph* noted: "Post mortem examinations reveal that a significant number of the gunshot deaths involve a single bullet, execution-style. There are cases of people having had electrical drills forced through their skulls and into their brains. Others have had their eyes burnt out. Many had hands bound by tape or handcuffs."

A 66-year-old Baghdad gravedigger told the October 27 online edition of the Iraqi journal *Azzaman*: "Most of the bodies brought to us are either killed by explosions or firearms. We have seen nothing like this. Mutilated bodies beyond recognition, bodies shot in the head with hands still cuffed. I have been in this profession for most of my life. But what I see now scares me to death."

Such is the weight of evidence against the interior ministry police and militias linked to the government that even British ambassador William Patey—the representative of the Bush administration's main ally in the illegal occupation—has called for an investigation.

Many of the accusations involve the 5,000-strong Wolf Brigade of the interior ministry police commandos. In

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May this year, the *New York Times* magazine reported in detail how the Bush administration had overseen the formation of this special paramilitary unit.

The Wolf Brigade was assembled in 2004 by an elite team of American operatives working under the orders of the then US ambassador to Iraq, John Negroponte.

Its formation was part of a US policy labeled by the *Times* magazine as the "Salvador option"—a campaign of mass killing modeled on the slaughter carried out by right-wing death-squads in El Salvador during the 1980s. An even more appropriate comparison would have been with the CIA operation in Vietnam, codenamed "Operation Phoenix", in which American death squads hunted down and murdered 20,000 to 70,000 alleged supporters of the Vietnamese liberation movement.

Negroponte had the necessary credentials to initiate such an operation in Iraq. He served as the head of the American embassy in Honduras from 1981 to 1985, advising the US-backed government as it unleashed paramilitaries to kill and torture hundreds of opponents.

The individuals that he selected to recruit and train the interior ministry police had an even longer history of working with US-backed Latin American regimes and their death squads.

Steve Casteel, a high-ranking Drug Enforcement Administration official who advised the Colombian government, was appointed the interior ministry's senior advisor. Paramilitary units in Colombia, using the cover of the "war on drugs", have carried out mass killings in rebellious areas of the country.

The main US military advisor to the police commandos was James Steele, who, according to the biography for a recent lecture he delivered in Washington, "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". During the "height of the guerilla war" in El Salvador, as many as 70,000 left-wing opponents of the regime were murdered by the government "counter-terrorist" death squads.

Most of the individuals recruited by Casteel and Steele into the Iraqi police commandos were former members of Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard—the main force used to suppress internal dissent.

Soon after the commandos began operations accusations emerged of assassinations, extra-judicial killings and torture. The US news service Knight Ridder and British newspaper, the *Observer*, have published lengthy articles in which witnesses claim that men who were murdered had been taken into custody by the commandos.

One of the Knight Ridder journalists who compiled the allegations, Yasser Salihee, was himself shot through the head by a sniper as he approached a US checkpoint on June 24, just three days before his story broke. Six weeks later, American journalist Steven Vincent was kidnapped by alleged interior ministry police and murdered after reporting for the *New York Times* on government death squads in Basra.

The main organisation Vincent alleged was involved in extra-judicial killings alongside the police was the Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia of the Shiite fundamentalist Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—one of the main parties in the Iraqi government.

The Iraqi interior minister is one of the leading representatives of SCIRI, Bayan Jabr. Since the formation of the current Shiite-Kurdish government coalition in late April, Jabr is alleged to have inserted a large number of Badr Brigade militiamen into the ministry, where they work alongside the former members of Hussein's secret police and Republican Guard who were given amnesty by the US military in 2004 in exchange for working for the occupation forces against the resistance.

An Iraqi businessman, who called himself "Thaer", told the October 31 *Washington Times* that the Badr Brigade is headquartered on 11th floor of the interior ministry, one floor above the intelligence agency and two floors above the police commandos.

This is the reality of the so-called "democracy" the White House claims to have created in Iraq. More than two-and-a-half years after the invasion, much of the country is still under the direct or indirect control of resistance groups. The population as a whole is growing increasingly restive over the nightmarish living conditions they confront and the arrogance of the occupation and its puppet government. To maintain its tenuous grip over the country, the Bush administration is relying on an apparatus of paid killers and thugs to murder and terrorise the opposition, while the US military unleashes criminal attacks to crush rebellious cities and towns.

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