

Hundreds of Iraqi academics and professionals assassinated by death squads

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Hundreds of Iraqi academics and professionals have been assassinated since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, according to a petition to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions from the European peace group BRussells [sic] Tribunal on Iraq.

The petition has been signed by Nobel Prize winners Harold Pinter, J. M. Coetzee, José Saramago, and Dario Fo, as well as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Cornel West, and Tony Benn. A Green party member of the European Parliament from Britain, Caroline Lucas, has called for support for the investigation.

The exact figure of deaths is unknown; estimates range from about 300 to more than 1,000. According to Iraqi novelist Haifa Zangana, writing in the *Guardian* last month, Baghdad universities alone have lost 80 members of their staffs. These figures do not include those who have survived assassination attempts.

Intellectuals from all regions of Iraq have been killed. They include specialists in physical education, journalism, Arabic literature, and the sciences. Physicians have also been targeted at a high rate.

The victims have been Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Kurds, and Turkomans, and they have held a variety of political views. They have been shot down at work, at home, and in their cars or have simply disappeared.

Zarngana writes that Abdul Razaq al-Na'as, a Baghdad University professor, was murdered on January 28 when two cars blocked his entrance and gunmen fired on him. He was a vocal opponent of the occupation on al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya television.

Dr. Abdullateef al-Mayah, a well-known academic, was killed in 2004, 12 hours after he criticized the Iraqi Governing Council on al-Jazeera television.

In the *Independent* over a year ago, Robert Fisk had already noted the growing trend. "The dean of the college of law in Mosul, murdered last month, was the most gruesome killing. 'She was in bed with her husband when

they came for her,' a Baghdad colleague told me yesterday. 'They coolly shot both of them in their bed. Then they cut off both their heads with knives.'"

The BRussells Tribunal website (www.brusselstribunal.org) contains a number of letters from Iraq about the situation. One describes the murder of Professor Nawfal Ahmed from the Institute for Fine Arts in Baghdad on December 26, 2005:

"Unknown armed men had assassinated a university professor of the institute of fine arts, on Monday morning in Toopchy district in Baghdad. A source from the ministry of defense said that; armed men fired a stream of bullets towards professor Nawfal Ahmed, on eight morning, while he was getting out of his house, heading to his working office."

Another letter from Tara Al-Hashimi, the daughter of the late Dr. Wissam Al-Hashimi, a geologist and internationally known expert in carbonates, says:

"[M]y father (Dr. AL- Hashimi) has died. He was kidnapped early in the morning on the 24th Aug 2005 while going to work, his recent papers were stolen. A ransom was given but unfortunately he was shoot twice in the head and died. May his soul rest in peace. As his ID was taken from him it took us about 2 weeks to find his body in one of Baghdad's hospitals."

The murders have forced Iraqi professionals to leave the country in large numbers. Death threats, often letters accompanied by a single bullet, are common.

In January, the *Washington Post* reported the case of a leading Iraqi cardiologist, Dr. Omar Kubasi, now an exile in Amman, Jordan:

"Kubasi left Baghdad after he and nine other doctors received letters, written in a childish hand, telling them they would be killed if they did not stop working in their native Iraq. He and his colleagues had been objects of threats before, but the last carried a foreboding urgency."

No one has been prosecuted or even arrested in any of

the murders. No group has claimed responsibility. A variety of organizations are widely suspected by Iraqis, including the Israeli Mossad (which assassinated Iraqi scientists working on the country's nuclear program in the 1970s and 1980s), the American military (which has harassed and beaten Iraqi academics) and, in the north, the Kurdish Peshmerga.

There are clearly a variety of groups operating, but the evidence points to a leading role of death squads organized by the supporters of the pro-American government, especially in the Interior Ministry, in conjunction with Shiite fundamentalist militias such as the Badr Brigade.

The same groups, believed to be responsible for the recent anti-Sunni pogroms, are popularly called the "black crows" because of their black uniforms.

"They're also called the men in black. Nobody dares identify them although everybody knows who they are. They are groups selected by some political parties that have infiltrated the Interior Ministry and directly report to it," remarked Mutahana Hareth Al-Dari, a spokesman of the Iraqi Association of Muslim Scholars, in this week's issue of the Egyptian *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*.

The immediate reason is not hard to find: most of these intellectuals opposed the American occupation of their country.

As Haifa Zangana notes: "Most were vocally opposed to the occupation.... Like many Iraqis, I believe these killings are politically motivated and connected to the occupying forces' failure to gain any significant social support in the country. For the occupation's aims to be fulfilled, independent minds have to be eradicated."

This is a part of a program of cultural destruction, and it emanates from Washington.

The appearance of death squads in Iraq stepped up after the installation of John Negroponte as ambassador to Iraq in June 2004. Negroponte was the ambassador to Honduras at the height of the American-sponsored counter-insurgencies in Central America in the 1980s. He is an experienced operative in creating and managing extra-judicial killings, the so-called Salvador option.

Similarly, veterans of US "dirty wars" in Latin America—James Steele, who oversaw counterinsurgency operations in El Salvador during the height of the killing there 20 years ago, and Steve Casteels, who worked with US anti-guerilla and anti-drug operations in Colombia, Peru and elsewhere—were brought in to oversee the Iraqi Interior Ministry's operations.

The goal, however, is not simply to silence critics of the

puppet regime. The assassination policy is an attempt to create a tractable population.

It includes weakening Iraqis even on the physical level. The murders and emigration of physicians have been particularly devastating in a country once known for the high quality of its health care system that now confronts electricity shortages at hospitals and skyrocketing incidences of infectious disease and traumatic injury.

But the killing of art historians, geologists, and writers must be explained as an attempt to destroy the intellectual health of Iraq.

The loss of academics "is causing a drop in the quality of higher education," according to the UN's *IRINnews.org*. " 'The best professors are leaving the country and we are losing the best professionals, the real losers are the next generation of students—the future of Iraq.' Abbas Muhammad, a student of Pharmacology at Baghdad University said."

The country's intelligentsia was already depleted in the period from 1990 to 2003, when an estimated 30 percent had left the country for economic reasons.

The goal now, encouraged or allowed by Bush administration, and implemented by its stooges in Iraq, is to destroy the historical consciousness of the Iraqi people, as a means of further subjugating them to US imperialism and its Iraqi supporters.

According to the UN's International Leadership Institute, "84% of Iraq's higher learning institutions have been burnt, looted or destroyed." The thefts from the Iraqi Museum of April 2003, the untrammelled looting of hundreds of archaeological sites and the burning of libraries place Iraqi's access to culture, history, and science in grave danger. The assassinations and the flight of Iraqi professionals are the most criminal part of this process.



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