

# Blackwater mercenaries resume patrols in wake of Baghdad civilian killings

Kate Randall

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Armed guards of Blackwater USA have resumed escorting American officials in Baghdad less than a week after the security company shot and killed at least 11 Iraqi civilians and wounded at least 13 others.

The decision by the US embassy to send the mercenaries back onto the streets of the Iraqi capital came despite calls by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that the US State Department sack the company, and a demand by the Iraqi government that security personnel from Blackwater and other security firms be stripped of their immunity from prosecution.

The redeployment of the Blackwater patrols flies in the face of Bush administration claims that it is building a “sovereign” Iraq government, and that the US occupation is making progress in its mission to bring “democracy” to the beleaguered country.

The US has dismissed the preliminary findings of an Iraqi government review, carried out by the Interior, National Security and Defense ministries, which found that the Blackwater guards had fired on Iraqi civilians September 16 without provocation. The US embassy to date has released no findings from a separate investigation it is conducting into last Sunday’s events. In its only statement on the incident, Blackwater USA has said the convoy was responding to an ambush.

The state minister for national security affairs, Shirwan al-Waili, said the Iraqi investigation was nearly complete and that he believed the findings were definitive. “The shots fired on the Iraqis were unjustifiable,” he told the *New York Times*, “It was harsh and horrible.” The Iraq government is also investigating six other violent episodes involving Blackwater this year that left at least 10 Iraqis dead and 15 wounded.

On Saturday, the Iraqi government also said it expects to refer criminal charges related to the incident to its courts. The Iraqi government’s preliminary report stated that “the murder of citizens in cold blood in the Nisour area by Blackwater is considered a terrorist action against civilians just like any other terrorist operation. The criminals will be referred to the Iraqi court system.”

It is unlikely this bluster will come to anything. Under a provision known as Order 17 enacted under the Iraq Provisional Authority in the early days of the occupation, the US military and foreign contractors are granted immunity from prosecution under Iraqi law. No Western contractors are known to have been convicted in Iraq of any crimes in the four and a half years of the war.

The preliminary findings of the Iraqi investigation—as well as the accounts of eyewitnesses to the incident—depict a colonial occupier operating with contempt for the lives of a subject people. The Iraqi report concludes, “The Blackwater company is considered 100 percent guilty through this investigation.” Iraqi investigators reportedly have a videotape showing the security company’s guards firing on civilians.

According to the Interior Ministry’s account, the events of last Sunday began when a bomb exploded shortly before noon about a mile north of Baghdad’s Nisour Square, near the Rahman mosque, which is under construction. According to the *Times*, whose reporter viewed a copy of the report, US Embassy officials say the convoy was responding to the explosion, although “it is still unclear whether it was carrying officials away from the bomb scene, driving towards it to pick someone up or simply providing support.”

The Blackwater convoy of at least four SUVs drove into the square just after noon and took positions blocking the flow of traffic in three directions. A car approaching from the south apparently did not stop, and the Blackwater guards opened fired, killing the driver, according to the ministry account.

An Iraqi official told the *Times*, “The woman next to the driver had a baby in her arms. She started to scream. They shot her.” The baby was also killed. He said the guards then fired what appeared to be grenades or pump guns into the car. “The car kept rolling, so they burned it,” the official said.

Traffic officer Ali Khalaf, who was on the scene, provided the following chilling account to Agence France-Presse:

“The American convoy arrived...and as usual I stopped the traffic to allow them to pass,” he said. Then the guards hurled water bottles at cars, their apparent custom, to stop traffic as the convoy drove though.

“Then without reason, they opened fire. Four shots in the air, aiming just above the cars,” Khalaf told AFP. “But one of the bullets struck a man in his car. I went to his aid but he was already dead, his body was slumped on the dashboard. His wife was then killed before my eyes by a bullet that hit her in the head.”

He said he ran to take shelter as the gunfight ensued. The car with the dead couple and baby “continued to move, with its doors open and the bodies inside—like a phantom vehicle.

“The Americans fired at everything that moved, with a machine gun and even with a grenade launcher. There was panic. Everyone tried to flee. Vehicles tried to make U-turns to escape.”

Khalaf said people then got out of their cars and tried to flee, some struck down as they ran. “A car was hit by two grenades and burst into fire, engulfing its occupants in flames,” AFP reports.

“There were dead bodies and wounded people everywhere, the road was full of blood. A bus was also hit and several of its occupants were wounded,” the traffic officer recounted. He added that two small black helicopters—the type that always accompany Blackwater convoys—also swept down and sprayed the scene with machine-gun fire.

In the wake of the atrocity, the Iraqi government is also investigating other incidents this year involving Blackwater. These include a February 4 shooting that killed an Iraqi journalist near the Foreign Ministry; the killing of three guards at the Iraqi state television station on February 7; February 14, when Blackwater employees allegedly smashed windshields; a shooting in May near the Interior Ministry that left one person dead; the September 9 shooting deaths of five people near a Baghdad city government building; and a September 12 shooting in eastern Baghdad that wounded five people.

Last December 24, a Blackwater guard allegedly shot and killed a bodyguard for Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi inside Baghdad’s Green Zone. The Blackwater employee quickly left Iraq after the incident, and no charges have been filed in the case.

These violent episodes, combined with the omnipresence of Blackwater’s convoys and overhead patrols, have earned the hatred of Iraqis. Armed with M-16 rifles and grenade launchers, the firm’s armed guards speed armored vehicles or SUVs mounted with machine guns through the streets, accompanied by their own helicopters, with gunners armed with automatic weapons leaning out the sides.

The Iraqi government’s awareness of the population’s seething anger in relation to the actions of Blackwater and other contractors no doubt played a part in the very public denunciations of the security company following last Sunday’s massacre.

The Blackwater mercenaries are widely referred to as “Mossad,” the Israeli security service despised across the Arab world. “They kill innocent people in the street,” Hameed Hussein, a pensioner in West Baghdad, told AFP. “Where else in the world does this happen? These are not security forces but rather forces to kill Iraqis. They are frenzied dogs.”

Mohammed Abdullah, 32, an engineer living in the western Mansour district, commented, “They behave just like the US soldiers. They are part of the occupation forces, which is why they behave this way.”

A traffic policeman in central Baghdad recounted, “Two weeks ago, guards of a convoy opened fire randomly that led to the killing of two policeman.... I swear they are Mossad.”

Before last Sunday’s episode that claimed at least 11 lives, senior Iraqi officials had repeatedly complained to US authorities about Blackwater’s involvement in the killing of Iraqis, but were rebuffed time and again. Blackwater also refused to answer any questions about the reported incidents.

The US response exposes the brutality of the US war and the contempt the occupiers have for the population, as well as the utter fraud of Iraqi government “sovereignty.” The US invokes this supposed sovereignty when it suits its interests—to accuse Iran or

Syria of “meddling” and to justify US military operations and mass repression in the name of fighting Al Qaeda.

However, when it comes to a clash between the puppet government and its masters—in the streets of Baghdad, the capital city—the pretense of sovereignty is dropped and the US dictates the course of action. The evidence uncovered by the Iraqi government investigation is written off and there are to be no consequences for the murder of Iraqi civilians by a gang of hired mercenaries.

According to the US Embassy and State Department, what becomes of Blackwater hinges on the results of a US-led investigation, and not that of the Iraqi authorities. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Friday that she had ordered a “full and complete review” of procedures for providing security to US diplomats, and that this review would examine their “rules of engagement.”

At the same time, she openly defended Blackwater’s services, “We have needed and received the protection of Blackwater for a number of years now, and they have lost their own people in protecting our own people—and that needs to be said—in extremely dangerous circumstances.”

It is estimated that 20,000 to as many as 48,000 operatives from at least 25 private security companies are currently operating in Iraq. Blackwater USA has an estimated 1,000 employees in Iraq and government contracts totaling at least \$800 million, providing security to US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and other diplomats.

These security contactors form an integral part of the US military operation and function according to the “rules of engagement” set down by the US occupiers. Removing these mercenaries from Iraq would be a logistical and security disaster, and it is for this reason that they will remain. The US has no intention of abiding by the orders of the Iraqi Interior Ministry to revoke their license or expel them from the country.

To perpetuate and secure the occupation, the Iraqi population is subjected to a reign of mass terror and intimidation, including the gunning down of innocent civilians. The perpetrators of such crimes—either US military troops or contractors—are immune from prosecution and the top military and government officials ultimately responsible are not held accountable for the crimes.

In the case of Blackwater, there is another insidious component. The company has close ties to the Bush administration and the Republican Party and the US intelligence apparatus. Cofer Black, vice chairman of Blackwater USA, worked in the Directorate of Operations at the CIA for 28 years, serving as director of the CIA’s Counterterrorist Center in 1999. He also served as the State Department coordinator for counterterrorism.

Blackwater is only one of the network of corporations with close connections to the Bush administration that have profited from the destruction of Iraqi society, to the tune of billions of dollars. The civilians gunned down near Baghdad’s Nisour Square last Sunday are the latest casualties to be sacrificed in this imperialist pursuit.



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