

# Crying Wolf: Media Disinformation and Death Squads in Occupied Iraq

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## Abstract

The phenomenon of death squads operating in Iraq has become generally accepted over recent months. However, in its treatment of the issue, the mainstream media has zealously followed a line of attributing extrajudicial killings to unaccountable Shia militias who have risen to prominence with the electoral victory of Ibramhim Jafaari's Shia-led government in January. The following article examines both the way in which the information has been widely presented and whether that presentation has any actual basis in fact. Concluding that the attribution to Shia militias is unsustainable, the article considers who the intellectual authors of these crimes against humanity are and what purpose they serve in the context of the ongoing occupation of the country.

Shortly before dawn on 14 September 2005, just hours before a huge bomb exploded in Baghdad killing 88 labourers, around 50 men in army uniforms arrived at the village of Taji 16km north of Baghdad in military vehicles, bearing military identification. After searching the village, they seized 17 local men, described by one witness as vegetable sellers, ice sellers and taxi drivers. Handcuffed and blindfolded, the men were led from their homes before being shot in the head in the main square ([Newsday](#), [Al Jazeera](#), [Juan Cole](#)).

Such killings represent a pattern of violence as frightening as and perhaps more systematic than the steady wave of bombings targeting civilians in occupied Iraq. Whilst the pattern of death-squad-style executions is broadly recognised, it remains badly understood and, in its representation, deeply distorted.

The appearance of death squads was first highlighted in May this year, when over a 10-day period dozens of bodies were found casually disposed of in rubbish dumps and vacant areas around Baghdad. All of the victims had been handcuffed, blindfolded and shot in the head and many of them also showed signs of having been brutally tortured. On 5 May 15 bodies were discovered in an industrial area called Kasra-Wa-Atash and subsequently identified as belonging to a group of farmers seized from a Baghdad market. The bodies revealed such torture marks as broken skulls, burning, beatings and right eyeballs removed. Witnesses claimed the men had been arrested by members of the security forces ([BBC](#), [Guardian](#)). Less than two weeks later, 15 more bodies were found at two sites ([KUNA](#)). According to the chairman of the Sunni Waqf court, Adnan Muhammad Salman, the victims were Sunnis who had been arrested at their homes or at mosques ([ArabicNews.com](#)).

The evidence was sufficiently compelling for the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), a leading Sunni organisation, to issue public statements in which they accused the security forces attached to the Ministry of the Interior as well as the Badr Brigade, the former armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), of being behind the killings. They also accused the Ministry of the Interior of conducting state terrorism ([Financial Times](#)).

Since then, a steady stream of the victims of extrajudicial killings has flowed through the Baghdad morgue. Characteristically, the victims' hands are tied or handcuffed behind their backs and they have been blindfolded. In most cases they also appear to have been whipped with a cord, subjected to electric shocks or beaten with a blunt object and shot to death, often with single bullets to the head. Yasser Salihee, a journalist for Knight Ridder investigating the bodies, wrote that eyewitnesses claimed many of the victims were seized by men wearing commando uniforms in white Toyota Land Cruisers with police markings. ([Knight Ridder](#)). Salihee's last article was published on 27 June, three days after he was fatally shot by a US sniper at a routine checkpoint.

It is impossible to know exactly how many people are being killed in this way. Salihee reported that more than 30 examples occurred in less than a week, while Faik Baqr, director of Baghdad's central morgue, states that before the occupation of Iraq, the morgue handled 200 to 250 suspicious deaths a month, of which perhaps 16 had firearm injuries. Now the figure is between 700 and 800, with some 500 firearm wounds (*op. cit.*). The Independent's Robert Fisk adds that there are so many bodies that human remains are stacked on top of each other and unidentified bodies are rapidly disposed of ([Robert Fisk](#)).

The killings have not been confined to Baghdad. For example, on 24 June six farmers were taken from the village of Hashmiyat 15km west of Baquba by men in army uniform; their decapitated bodies were found soon afterwards a mile from their homes ([Associated Press](#)). More recently, on 8 September, 18 people were abducted from the town of Iskandriyah 40km south of the capital by men in National Guard Uniforms and executed in isolated open land ([Xinhuanet](#)). These few examples represent the tip of a rapidly expanding iceberg, with the majority of extrajudicial-style killings seriously under-investigated and underreported.

In response to the accusations of police involvement, drawing on eyewitness accounts, Iraq's new Ministry of the Interior claims that it is easy to get hold of police uniforms and that the killings are the work of 'insurgents' masquerading as security forces in order to create sectarian divisions ([BBC](#)). Such denials are echoed by US special advisor to the ministry Steven Casteel, who has stated that, 'The small numbers that we've investigated we've found to be either rumor or innuendo' (Salihee, *op. cit.*).

Despite such denials, few journalists have been able to dismiss what the Observer's foreign editor Peter Beaumont describes as the 'extraordinary sense of impunity with which these abductions and killings take place' as mere innuendo ([Observer](#)), or the consistent eyewitness accounts of the kidnappers appearing with expensive foreign equipment issued to the security forces, such as the Toyota Land Cruisers and the Glock 9mm pistols, as simply rumour (Salihee, *op. cit.*). The Interior Ministry's explanation of large, heavily armed groups of resistance fighters moving freely about the capital becomes even less plausible when one considers that many of the killings took place following the onset of Operation Lightning/Thunder in late May. This divisional-size operation saw the deployment of 40,000 Iraqi troops, who sealed Baghdad and installed 675 checkpoints around the city ([Associated Press](#)). Hundreds of arrests followed as the security forces began to 'hunt down insurgents'

([BBC](#)). According to the AMS, in one instance, on 13 July, dozens of Interior Ministry commandos stormed several houses in northern Baghdad and detained 13 people, before torturing and killing them in a nearby apartment ([Gulf Daily News](#)).

However, instead of placing the blame squarely on the apparatus of the new Iraqi state, the mainstream media has almost exclusively chosen to shift the emphasis away, resorting to a number of standardised literary devices. The first device is to frame extrajudicial killings in the context of a wider panoply of supposed retaliatory sectarian violence. For example, Francis Curta of the Associated French Press writes that 'A series of tit-for-tat killings has raised sectarian tension to boiling points' (eg. [Mail&Guardian Online](#)), Mohamad Bazzi writing for Newsday refers to a 'wave of retaliatory killings' ([Newsday](#)), and James Hider of the London Times believes that 'the only certainty is that once [the bodies] are identified, someone will want revenge' ([Times Online](#)). The second device is to state or imply that the security forces are closely associated with largely unaccountable Shia militias, especially the Badr Brigade. For instance, Patrick Cockburn of the UK Independent writes that 'Some carrying out the attacks appear to belong to the 12,000-strong paramilitary police commandos', while, in almost the same breath he adds that 'Fear of Shia death squads, perhaps secretly controlled by the Badr Brigade, the leading Shia militia, frightens the Sunni' ([Independent](#)); in a similar vein, the BBC claims that 'Angry mourners at a funeral for some of those killed said they had died at the hands of police and Shia militiamen' ([BBC](#)).

Most importantly, reports variously stress that the government, Interior Ministry and police are under sectarian Shia control. Hence, Samir Haddad, a correspondent for Islam Online, refers to the 'dominant-Shiite newly-formed security forces' ([Islam Online](#)), the Chicago Tribune's Liz Sly states that Sunnis 'accused Iraq's security forces, now controlled by the Shiite-led government' ([Chicago Tribune](#)), Tom Lasseter, writing for the Inquirer, claims that 'Badr members have gained unprecedented authority' and that the Interior Minister, who controls the nation's police and commando forces, is a former Supreme Council official with close ties to Badr' ([Philadelphia Inquirer](#)), the Observer's Beaumont writes that 'Accountability has also become more opaque since the formation of the Shia-dominated government' (*op. cit.*), the BBC's Richard Galpin states that the 'Sunni community in particular claims it is being targeted by the Shia-dominated police force' ([BBC](#)), Anthony Loyd for the London Times talks of 'allegations of extensive extra-judicial killings of Sunnis by the Shia-dominated Iraqi security forces' ([Times Online](#)) and Sinan Salaheddin of the Associated Press, states 'The grisly finds have led Sunnis to believe that Shiite Muslims who dominate the government and the Interior Ministry are waging a quiet, deadly campaign against them' (eg. [Seattle Post-Intelligencer](#)).

Other devices include mentioning the Interior Ministry's claims of insurgents donning police or commando uniforms or implying that if the security forces are involved in torture and murder it is a reflection of the fact that it is composed of reconstituted members of the former state who know only a culture of violence and intimidation; this is clearly at odds with those reports that regard the security forces as entirely Shia dominated. Wilder devices talk about security forces' frustration or blame Zarqawi for attempting to inflame sectarian tensions. Whilst all of these devices are employed in various combinations, notably absent from every account is any serious examination of the new Iraqi state or, assiduously avoided, the role of the occupying powers, leaving the most thoughtful of journalist to wonder with Beaumont whether the Iraqi state is 'stumbling towards a policy of institutionalised torture' or whether human-rights abuses are conducted by 'rogue elements' within the security apparatus (Salihee's investigation represents the one exception, with the

emphasis placed firmly on the organs of the state, supported by solid primary evidence).

## Police Commandos and Disinformation Brigades

An instructive starting point for an examination of the prevailing media consensus is to consider some of the forces of the Iraqi state most closely associated with allegations of serious human rights abuses.

The majority of accusations are general. Journalists refer to the police, security forces, the National Guard or to poorly identified police commandos, but specific accusations have been made against a unit known as the Wolf Brigade. The identification of the Wolf Brigade with cases of abduction, torture and execution in Baghdad was first made on 16 May, when Mothana Harith Al-Dari, a spokesman for the AMS, stated that 'The mass killings and the crackdown and detention campaigns in north-eastern Baghdad over the past two days by members of the Iraqi police or by an Interior Ministry special force, known as the Wolf Brigade, are part of a state terror policy', in relation to the discoveries of the victims of extrajudicial executions noted above ([Islam Online](#)).

Within days a Knight Ridder journalist, Hannah Allam, had published under a variety of titles an article about the Wolf Brigade, highlighting their maverick tough-guy image and presenting their leader, who goes by the *nom de guerre* of Abul Waleed, as a devout Shiite, 'complete with a photo of Imam Ali and religious chants programmed into his constantly ringing cell phone.' ([Knight Ridder](#)). Allam informed readers that Waleed regarded the AMS as infidels and tossed their accusations of torture and murder into the bin. Additionally, readers learned that the unit was formed as the brainchild of Waleed in October 2004, saw its first action in Mosul after nearly two months' training with US forces, and is behind the inhuman television programme *Terrorists in the Grip of Justice*, in which tortured detainees are forced to confess to a lurid array of crimes ([Associated Press](#)). However, whilst belittling charges of horrendous human-rights violations as 'the usual complaints', Allam made no reference to the Wolf Brigade being a special forces unit attached to the Interior Ministry.

On 9 June rightwing US think tank the Council for Foreign Relations published a paper devoted to Iraqi militias ([CFR](#)), simultaneously repeated in the *New York Times*. In a series of FAQ-type entries, the report reiterated many of Allam's insights about the Wolf Brigade, as well as offering some additional tidbits:

*What is the Wolf Brigade?*

The most feared and effective commando unit in Iraq, experts say. Formed last October by a former three-star Shiite general and SCIRI member who goes by the *nom de guerre* Abu Walid, the Wolf Brigade is composed of roughly 2,000 fighters, mostly young, poor Shiites from Sadr City.

However, the paper went further in emphasising the units' sectarian Shiite character, stating that 'One of Badr's recent offshoots is a feared, elite commando unit linked to the Iraqi Interior Ministry called the Wolf Brigade', and spelling out the distinction between it and other, Sunni militia-style units.

*Are there any Sunni-led commando units?*

Yes. At least one counterinsurgency unit is headed by a former officer of Saddam Hussein's

Baath Party. The Special Police Commandos, like the Wolf Brigade, have a reputation for brutality, but the group is also considered one of Iraq's most effective and well-disciplined counterinsurgency units.

Those familiar with Peter Maas's article '[The Way of the Commandos](#)', published by *The New York Times Magazine* just six weeks earlier, will recognise that, in fact, the Wolf Brigade bears a striking similarity to the unit he identifies as the Special Police Commandos. The Police Commandos, too, were formed in autumn 2004 and saw one of their first major commitments in Mosul in November; like the Wolf Brigade, their leader also founded an unspeakably vile television show called *Terrorism in the Grip of Justice*.

But there are fundamental distinctions between these units as well. The Police Commandos were founded on the initiative of then Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib, the son of a former Iraqi Chief of Staff, believed by many to have been a major CIA asset ([National Review Online](#)), under the command of his uncle, an ex-Baathist, Sunni military intelligence officer and CIA coup-plotter called Adnan Thabit. Its recruits are drawn from former members of the special forces and Republican Guard, with mixed ethnic and religious background ([Washington Post](#)), while its chain of command is said to be largely Sunni. Most importantly, the Police Commandos were formed under the experienced tutelage and oversight of veteran US counterinsurgency fighters, and from the outset conducted joint-force operations with elite and highly secretive US special-forces units ([Reuters](#), [National Review Online](#)).

A key figure in the development of the Special Police Commandos was James Steele, a former US Army special forces operative who cut his teeth in Vietnam before moving on to direct the US military mission in El Salvador at the height of that country's civil war. Steele was responsible for selecting and training the small units (or death squads) who were boasted to have inflicted 60% of the casualties caused in that 'counterinsurgency' campaign (Manwaring, *El Salvador at War*, 1988, p 306-8). Principally, the tens of thousands of victims were civilians.

Another US contributor was the same Steven Casteel who as the most senior US advisor within the Interior Ministry brushed off serious and well-substantiated accusations of appalling human right violations as 'rumor and innuendo'. Like Steele, Casteel gained considerable experience in Latin America, in his case participating in the hunt for the cocaine baron Pablo Escobar in Colombia's Drugs Wars of the 1990s, as well as working alongside local forces in Peru and Bolivia (Maas [op. cit.](#)). Whilst Casteel's background is said to be Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the operation against Escobar was a joint intelligence effort, involving the CIA, DEA, Delta Force and a top-secret military intelligence surveillance unit known as Centra Spike ([Marihemp](#), [SpecWarNet](#)). The operation had no impact on Colombia's position as the world's major source of cocaine (which, incidentally or not, owed much to the CIA, who had become heavily involved in the trade as part of their secret funding of Nicaragua's Contra mercenary army; for a detailed account, read the series [Dark Alliance](#), originally published by the San Jose Mercury News), with the centre of gravity ultimately shifting to dozens of micro cartels ([Houston Chronicle](#)). However, the operation did lead to the formation of a death squad known as Los Pepes, which was to form the nucleus for Colombia's present paramilitary death-squad umbrella organisation, the AUC, responsible for over 80 percent of the country's most serious human-rights abuses ([Colombia Journal](#)). Whilst no official connection was ever admitted, Los Pepes relied on the intelligence data held in the fifth-floor steel vault at the US Embassy in Bogota that served as the operation's nerve centre. Lists of the death squad's victims rapidly came to mirror



those of Escobar's associates collated at the embassy headquarters ([Cocaine.org](#), [Cannabis News](#)).

Casteel's background is significant because this kind of intelligence-gathering support role and the production of death lists are characteristic of US involvement in counterinsurgency programs and constitute the underlying thread in what can appear to be random, disjointed killing sprees. Probably the best-attested example of such an operation is Indonesia during the early years of the Suharto dictatorship, when CIA officers provided the names of thousands of people, many of them members of the Indonesian Communist Party, to the army, who dutifully slaughtered them ([Kathy Kadane](#)). Similar cases can be made for the CIA supplying death lists and/or overseeing operations in Vietnam ([OC Weekly](#)), Guatemala, where death lists are known to have been compiled but were supposedly never acted upon ([The Consortium](#)), and El Salvador, where former killers have come forward to describe sharing desk space with US advisors who collected the 'intelligence' from 'heavy interrogation' but were spared details of the subsequent murders ([Covert Action Quarterly](#)). For an extensive list of countries in which the CIA has supported death squads, see the database compiled by Ralph McGehee ([Serendipity](#)).

Such centrally planned genocides are entirely consistent with what is taking place in Iraq today under the auspices of crackdowns like Operation Lightning, which make use of so-called Rapid Intrusion Brigades to make widespread, well orchestrated arrests ([Financial Times](#)). It is also consistent with what little we know about the Special Police Commandos, which was tailored to provide the Interior Ministry with a special-forces strike capability ([US Department of Defense](#)). In keeping with such a role, the Police Commando headquarters has become the hub of a nationwide command, control, communications, computer and intelligence operations centre, courtesy of the US ([Defend America](#)). Interestingly, supplying a state-of-the-art communications network to coordinate mass murder was part of the plan in Indonesia as well (Pilger, *The New Rulers of the World*, p 30); it is doubtless common practice.

Finally, we know that by 30 January of this year, the Police Commandos had six functioning brigades and in early April the *Al-Nimr* (Tiger) Brigade took over from the *Al-Dhib* (Wolf) Brigade in Mosul ([UNAMI](#)). Interestingly, one of the Police Commandos' first Brigade commanders was a Shiite, apparently called Rashid al-Halafi, but Maas noted that 'he was regarded warily by other Shiites because he held senior intelligence posts under Saddam Hussein'.

## **Untangling the Web**

Clearly, the Wolf Brigade, though commonly treated in media reports as an autonomous entity, is actually one component of the Interior Ministry's Special Police Commandos. Abu Walid, identified occasionally as Brig. Gen. Mohammed Qureishi, is the brigade commander, under overall command of Adnan Thabit. Another figure linked with both the Wolf Brigade and Police Commandos is Major General Rashid Flayyih, variously identified as commander of the brigade or the whole formation. If he can be identified with the brigade commander Rashid al-Halafi identified by Maas, it can be surmised that he has either been promoted or is another incarnation of Abu Walid.

Incredibly, I have not been able to find a single report written since accusations started to be made about the Wolf Brigade's involvement in the Baghdad killings that makes their identification with the Police Commandos clear, with journalists content to loosely refer to

the unit as police commandos, as though there might be all sorts of police commando units. Though this might at first seem pedantic, the lack of clarity becomes even more incredible in the case of the 10 bricklayers suffocated in the back of a police van on 10 July ([San Diego Union Tribune](#)). To my knowledge, this remains the only case in which members of the security forces have been securely identified, with a survivor who had feigned death able to provide first-hand testimony. The unit responsible was the Wolf Brigade, but this information must be deduced from a reference in one article to the victims being taken to a police station at al Nisour Square ([Knight Ridder](#)) and Beaumont's mention that the Wolf Brigade is accused of running an interrogation centre as its Nissor Square headquarters (*op. cit.*). It seems that a nebulous Wolf Brigade linked to Badr, full of vengeful Shiite militiamen serves as a useful foil for allegations of 'state terrorism', but that when the accusations are sufficiently well-grounded, it is easier to keep it out of the spotlight for fear that a pattern of gross and systematic violations of human rights might start to emerge. The significance of this lies far beyond merely being able to expose sloppy journalistic practices, but actually reveals key characteristics of both the US imperial war machine and of the nature of their current occupation of Iraq.

With the finger of responsibility increasingly and inevitably pointing at well-organised counterinsurgency units operating from the Interior Ministry, one line of defence remains before intellectual authorship must be placed at the hands of the occupying powers. Since the election of 30 January and the transfer of office from the interim government of Ayad Allawi to the transitional one of Ibrahim Jafari in May, the mainstream media has unanimously chorused that power has fallen into the hands of Iraq's Shia majority. Most specifically, it is repeatedly claimed that the Interior Ministry and its security forces have come under the control of SCIRI and even that the Badr Brigades now wield considerable power within the ministry, with the new Interior Minister, Bayan Jabor, described as a former Badr member. The manifestation of this control lies in the policy of de-Baathification, a process that was halted under the interim government of Ayad Allawi, but that was considered fundamental by the incoming government. The policy was actively opposed by the US administration, which feared that experienced personnel (for which, read Washington's favourites) might be lost, especially within the security forces and intelligence apparatus ([Washington Post](#)).

According to Firas al-Nakib, a legal advisor at the Interior Ministry and a Sunni, 160 senior members of the Interior Ministry staff were rapidly dismissed and many police commanders were replaced with Shiites loyal to the Shiite bloc that won the elections ([Knight Ridder](#)). Yet, after speaking with Jabor, General Flayyih was reported to be reassured, with the former Badr member not only promising to support the Police Commandos ([Financial Times](#)), but calling for their rapid and more extensive deployment ([Los Angeles Times](#)). Flayyih's continuing tenure is particularly noteworthy, as, though a Shiite himself, Flayyih was in charge of the suppression of the Shia uprising in Nasiriya following the first Gulf War, and is, as such, a frontrunner in any serious Shia-led policy of de-Baathification. Like Flayyih, Adnan Thabit has retained a senior position, commanding all of the Interior Ministry's special forces ([Multi-National Force – Iraq](#)).

The issue of de-Baathification was recently addressed by Jabor, who explained that the discharge of personnel was handled by a general inspector and that recruitment was not influenced by sect ([Al Mendhar](#)). Backing up his statements, he pointed out that many senior security posts within the ministry were held by Sunnis, including that of deputy minister for intelligence affairs (also leader of the Interior Ministry's spy service), currently

held by General Hussain Kamal.

In fact, the entire intelligence establishment is a creation of the Anglo-American secret services ([Los Angeles Times](#)), which began building at least as early as the beginning of the occupation ([Detroit Free Press](#)), although it may be suspected that the process was conceived long before. The new Iraqi establishment was staffed by long-term CIA assets, such as General Mohammad Shahwani, who had been nurtured by the CIA since the late 1980s ([Asia Times Online](#)) and became director of the new National Intelligence Service (the *Mukhabarat*). Like Thabit and Flayyih, other old CIA hands, Shahwani had participated in attempted coups against the government of Iraq. Further agents (presumably existing intelligence assets for the most part) were recruited from Iraq's main political groups, consisting of SCIRI, the Dawa Party, the two main Kurdish parties, the Iraqi National Congress and the Iraqi National Accord. These agents became the Collection, Management and Analysis Directorate (CMAD), whose principal job was to 'turn raw intelligence into targets that could be used in operations' ([Detroit Free Press](#), *op. cit.*). Initially, 'operations' were carried out by a paramilitary unit composed of militia from the five main parties, who, under the supervision of US commanders, worked with US special forces to track down 'insurgents' ([Washington Post](#)). As the new Iraqi state apparatus developed, CMAD was split between the ministries of Defence and Interior, with an 'elite corps' creamed off to form the National Intelligence Service ([Detroit Free Press](#), *op. cit.*). To oversee all three bodies, the National Intelligence Coordination Committee was established, headed, as National Security Advisor (appointed in April 2004), by Mowaffak Rubaie. This 'leading Shiite moderate' had been a spokesman for the Dawa Party in the 1980s when it was a serious terrorist organisation targeting Iraq, before moving on to help coordinate the Iraqi opposition from London ([Asia Times Online](#), *op. cit.*). In London he worked with the Khoei Foundation, a pro-US charitable organisation that has distributed money for the CIA and is linked with the National Endowment for Democracy through Prime minister Jaafari's advisor Laith Kuba, another long-term CIA asset ([Village Voice](#)).

These new intelligence agencies supply the data for the Interior Ministry to make arrests. A graphic and harrowing account of such arrests on 27 June 2004 was provided by UPI's P. Mitchell Prothero, in what he describes as the 'welcome arrival of frontier-style law enforcement'. Prothero described how local residents 'seemed shocked' as their doors were broken in and 'men were dragged from their homes dishevelled and screaming' by members of a SWAT team in central Baghdad. The raid had been planned for months by General Kamal's intelligence agency within the Interior Ministry and the names of more than 100 detainees were checked against prepared lists ([Washington Times](#)). Prothero witnessed many of those detainees 'worked over' with metal batons and lengths of hose in the backs of vans, but the most serious abuse came later, within the Interior Ministry compound. On 29 June members of the Oregon National Guard swept into the grounds of the Interior Ministry and disarmed plain-clothed Iraqi policemen whom they had observed beating bound and blindfolded prisoners ([Oregonian](#)). The US soldiers began to administer first aid to the prisoners, who had also been starved of food and water for three days; many were clearly in a very serious condition. Steven Casteel was called to help deal with the situation ([Boston Globe](#)). After hours of negotiations, the soldiers unwillingly withdrew, leaving the victims in the hands of their torturers. Perhaps their ultimate fate will never be known, but as Casteel commented, 'There's always a pendulum between freedom and security'.

Like Thabit and Flayyih, Shahwani has retained his position under the transitional government and continues to report directly to the CIA ([Seattle Times](#)). Clearly, however,



the purpose of stating or implying that unaccountable militias are behind the extrajudicial executions and/or that sectarian rivalries, especially Shia control of the Interior Ministry (which, as Beaumont correctly points out, is the centre of the horror), are to blame, is to distance the US from the almost unthinkable ongoing crimes against humanity. Comparable disinformation strategies have been employed in every counterinsurgency conflict with which the US has been involved; it is known as establishing 'plausible deniability'. For example, in Colombia, where the US has been deeply involved for decades, paramilitary death squads are invariably described in the media as a third force in the armed conflict, despite the fact that their victims are typically civilian opponents of the government, their members are drawn directly from serving members of the armed forces and they are only able to operate with the active complicity of the army ([Human Rights Watch: The "Sixth Division"](#)). In reality, they function as part of a shadow state, which exists to implement policies that must remain unaccountable.

More specifically, in the case of Iraq, this disinformation strategy not only seems to be designed to mask the real intellectual authors of genocidal crimes, but also, increasingly, appears to be directed towards creating the very sectarian divisions that it hides behind.

### **Towards Balkanisation**

In every country where US-backed counter insurgency operations have taken place with their attendant massacres and death squads, the conflict has existed as one dimension in a strategy of neo-colonisation. In Indonesia the communists were exterminated as part of the corporate takeover of the economy, setting the stage for the globalisation of Asia (Pilger, *op. cit.* p 15-44); in Colombia today, brutal death-squad massacres and the assassination of popular leaders exist to safeguard and extend the investments of foreign multinationals in oil and mining as well as as part of an ongoing process of privatisation.

In this respect, Iraq is no different. Over and above the desire to control Iraq's massive oil reserves, the country is being subjected to enforced neo-liberal shock therapy, with wages slashed and the extensive state sector rapidly offered up for sale. Corresponding with this, is a catastrophic level of unemployment and the abandonment of service provision for the majority of the population, in short a return to typical Third World conditions ([The New Standard](#)). Such a process of economic devastation is not only unpopular, it is intolerable and there can be no doubt that most people in Iraq will oppose cuts and sell-offs and demand a restoration of employment and services. This is not a sectarian issue. To the extent to which opposition becomes effective, the leaders and activists of the movement are likely to become military targets for the state death squads, whatever guise they take.

It is hard to know exactly who the victims of the present wave of assassinations are. Certainly they have included some trade union leaders ([Iraqi Federation of Workers' Trade Unions](#)), while in the period up to March 2004 more than 1000 leading professionals and intellectuals had already been killed and thousands more had fled the country ([Al Jazeera](#)). Many of these people would have been members of the Baath party and their murders are very likely to be part of the policy of de-Baathification, which, insofar as it exists, has not targeted CIA collaborators, but will undoubtedly have included those seen as potential opponents of the new state. In passing, it is worth noting that while thousands of former teachers have been sacked, thousands more are being recruited from outside Iraq ([Al Mendhar](#)), presumably because they are either cheaper to employ (denied by the Iraqi government) or because they are more malleable to the new educational regime, which works closely with the World Bank and provides lucrative contracts to the Washington-based

Creative Associates Inc ([Education News](#)). Iraq's 30,000 new teachers have received just five days' training and must teach religion and a history that portrays Iraq's occupiers as saviours, rather than the former 'anti-Western propaganda' that might have served Iraqis better. Other victims of the death squads may be communists, the commentator Juan Cole noting that the Communist Party is so alarmed by the course of events that it is considering going underground; though he does not spell out the events that would force the party into hiding, they are not difficult to surmise ([Juan Cole](#)).

A further possibility, however, in addition to defeating a popularly backed resistance, is that the monstrous intelligence nexus created by the US in Iraq is orchestrating a strategy of ethnic cleansing as part of an effort to partition a country that might otherwise remain a regional pretender. Most of the military assaults have resulted in substantial civilian displacement (eg [Washington Times](#)), but, more worryingly, reports of families uprooting as the result of perceived sectarian violence are starting to become common. For example, in July, Mariam Fam of the Associated Press reported dozens of Shiites abandoned their homes in a poor farming community on the edge of Baghdad after receiving threats from Sunni militants that appeared in the form of typewritten flyers scattered on streets and doorsteps; prior to the Anglo-American invasion these people had shared their poverty, labour, food and intermarried with their Sunni neighbours ([North Country Times](#)). Similarly, Hala Jaber writing for the *Sunday Times* describes how Sunni families have fled Baghdad's majority-Shiite Iskan neighbourhood after the killings of 22 young Sunni men, taken away by men in police uniform who arrived in vehicles bearing police markings ([Times Online](#)). A similar situation is described in Baghdad's Ghalaliya district, where a spate of seemingly motiveless murders accelerated sharply over the summer, leaving more than 30 people, Sunnis and Shiites, dead ([Los Angeles Times](#)). The report claims that minority families there and elsewhere are selling their homes and moving to areas where they are in the majority. A similar picture is starting to emerge from other parts of the country. Jaber notes that thousands of Shiites have fled the predominantly Sunni towns of Ramadi, Falluja and Latafiya, while, according to Juan Cole, Sunnis are leaving Iraq's deep south and Arabs, presumably of both denominations, are being forced from the Kurdish district of Kirkuk ([Juan Cole](#)).

While many in the mainstream media and Iraq's puppet government have argued that insurgents linked to Abu Musab Zarqawi and al-Qaida are behind much of the violence, deliberately hoping to inflame sectarian divisions and incite a civil war (eg. [News Day](#)), it is interesting to note how closely their dangerous schemes correspond with the avowed aims of one of the most powerful figures in present-day Iraq. Mowaffak Rubaie, the US-installed national security advisor, promotes a vision that he calls 'democratic regionalism', by which Iraq would be dismembered into a loose federal system of four to six distinct provinces, with at least two Shiite provinces to the south and Baghdad as a separate district as well as the seat of federal government, nominally responsible for national defence ([Newsweek](#)). Coincidentally, such a plan is well catered for by Iraq's new constitution ([NPR](#)), but would amount to the disintegration of the Iraqi state. A *de facto* civil war would undoubtedly advance this process.

The parallels with the break up of Yugoslavia are obvious. Ed Joseph of the highly establishment Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars notes that 'the likelihood of civil war increases if, after attacks targeting a community, other members of the minority population flee', in turn persecuting minorities in the area to which they fled ([Los Angeles Times](#), *op. cit.*). However, where he sees the situation in Iraq as comparable to Bosnia, in

many ways the pattern is closer to that of Kosovo, where widespread ethnic cleansing against Serbs took place under the noses of NATO observers after the withdrawal of Yugoslav forces ([World Socialist Website](#)).

In view of mounting evidence of Anglo-American involvement in the bombing campaigns targeting Iraqi civilians, notably the brief arrest of two British SAS men found with a car packed with explosives ([William Bowles](#)), it is worth speculating a little on the implementation of their wider strategy. Discounting Al-Qaida and Zarqawi in Iraq as fabrications designed for easy media consumption ([Centre for Research on Globalisation](#)), we are left with a situation in which someone is targeting Shias, mainly through the planting of bombs around mosques and at religious ceremonies, and someone is targeting Sunnis, mainly through extrajudicial executions carried out by parties that look a lot like the police but have become linked with the Shiite Badr Brigade in the popular imagination. It is impossible that the Iraqi resistance could account for this pandemic of fratricidal violence, whatever Adnan Thabit might say about insurgents in police uniforms. It is equally impossible that SCIRI and the Badr Brigade could account for much of it in a milieu dominated by CIA assets and US military forces. What is possible is that both sides of the apparent sectarian violence are run as part of a huge CIA-lead intelligence operation designed to split Iraq at the seams. I tentatively suggest that the intelligence apparatus at the Interior Ministry is contriving attacks on Sunnis and that British and US special forces in conjunction with the intelligence apparatus at the Iraqi Defence Ministry are fabricating insurgent bombings of Shias. Overseeing the entire operation is the 'cream' of CMAD under the direction of top-level US intelligence asset Mowaffak Rubaie, a man already experienced at participating in bombing campaigns, undoubtedly working hand in glove with the CIA and the National Security Council in the US.

### **False Flags, Semiotics and Vulgar Marxists**

The French theorist Jean Baudrillard famously once stated that the first Gulf War did not take place. By this he did not mean that nothing happened, but that its presentation in the media consisted of an overwhelming barrage of the *signs* of War, which bore essentially no relationship to the annihilation of a Third World army by the most advanced military power in history. In short it was a simulation of war. This was perhaps the most extreme example of what Baudrillard referred to as the 'ecstasy of communication', that in our Information Age, concepts spin at such a rate that their outlines become lost and their original meanings are replaced with empty alternatives.

Fifteen years later, the same charges can be levelled against the recent Iraq 'War' and the country's subsequent occupation. Most importantly, I believe that a process akin to that Baudrillard highlighted is being actively employed to simulate a civil war in Iraq. False-flag intelligence operations are aimed at sowing seeds of a sectarian strife that was largely non-existent prior to the invasion. Thus, even many Sunni Iraqis are coming to believe that the well-organised death squads run from the CIA-controlled intelligence hub are actually the Badr Brigade they often claim to be; and thus British SAS men in Arab disguise plant bombs at Shia religious festivals to be blamed on fanatical Wahabi Sunni 'insurgents'.

Whether such tactics succeed in provoking further, autonomous acts of violence directed against the civilian population is much less significant than the impact they are able to exert within the media. This Anglo-American intelligence operation acts as a factory churning out the *signs* of Civil War: a 'wave of tit-for-tat sectarian violence' and the consequent ethnic cleansing. The signs are produced to be picked up by the media and spun and spun until

nothing is left but a nebulous Civil War with no internal logic or structure, with the occupying forces as powerless to intervene as they were in the Balkans while Iraq splits into Rubia's desired four to six autonomous provinces. Those few journalists, like Yasser Salihee and Steven Vincent, who break the mould and start to investigate the actual authorship of extrajudicial killings themselves become victims.

When one former CIA operative candidly claimed that 'Intelligence services are the heart and soul of a new country' ([Washington Post](#)), they were inadvertently expressing a position that Noam Chomsky might call 'vulgar Marxist'. What they were actually confessing is that the essence of a state is the organisation of violence as the ultimate coercive measure and that the intelligence apparatus functions as its brain. Little wonder then that the US is so closely involved with intelligence services the world over, or that both *coup d'états* and savage repressions of sectors of the population deemed opposed to US interests have emanated from the offices of these same services.

To penetrate the media smokescreen of spontaneous, uncontrollable violence and understand the role of intelligence operations in the creation of a beholden, occupied client state or series of statelets is fundamental to understanding the processes in Iraq today. It is also fundamental to recognising that the presence of Anglo-American forces in Iraq does not merely exacerbate the present violence; in Iraq we are the violence.

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