

# IRAQ: Thousands killed by government death squads

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*Faik Bakir, the director of the Baghdad morgue, has fled Iraq in fear of his life after reporting that more than 7000 people have been killed by Iraqi interior ministry death squads in recent months, John Pace, the outgoing head of the UN human rights office in Iraq, told the March 2 British Guardian.*

Pace said the Baghdad morgue has been receiving 700 or more bodies a month. The figures peaked at 1100 last July — many showing signs of torture.

“The vast majority of bodies showed signs of summary execution — many with their hands tied behind their back. Some showed evidence of torture, with arms and leg joints broken by electric drills”, said Pace. The killings had been happening long before the recent spate of sectarian killings following the February 22 bombing of a Shiite mosque in Samarra.

The *Guardian* reported that “Pace, whose contract in Iraq ended last month, said many killings were carried out by Shia militias linked to the interior ministry run by Bayan Jabr, a leading figure in the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)”. SCIRI is the main party in the coalition of Shiite religious parties that heads the US-backed Iraqi government.

“The Badr brigade [SCIRI’s militia] are in the police and are mainly the ones doing the killing”, said Pace. “They’re the most notorious.”

While, most of those killed were Sunnis, the attacks were also directed against Shiites who joined with Sunnis to protest the mosque bombing. The February 24 British *Independent* reported that “gunmen at a makeshift checkpoint south of Baghdad murdered 47 people who had been demonstrating against the destruction of the Shia shrine at Samarra, bringing Iraq close to a sectarian bloodbath”.

“The victims were Shia and Sunni returning from a demonstration in the town of Kenaan, when they were dragged from their cars and killed. Their bodies were left in a ditch by the side of the road.”

The March 4 *Washington Post* reported that an “international official in Baghdad, speaking on the condition of anonymity”, had told it that “about 1000 people had been killed” between the day of the Samarra mosque bombing and March 3, according to Iraqi morgue figures.

The Western corporate media seized upon the upsurge of killings that followed the Samarra

mosque bombing to claim that Iraq is on the verge of “civil war” between its Shiite Muslim majority and its Sunni Muslim minority. The implicit and often explicit message that has accompanied the “Iraq-is-on-the-brink-of-civil-war” stories is that only the presence of the US and other foreign occupation troops is preventing Iraqi Shiites and Sunnis from massacring each other.

During the US war in Vietnam, supporters of the war also claimed that the withdrawal of US troops would lead to a “bloodbath” — while the US war machine slaughtered at least 3 million Vietnamese. The Western media claims that a “premature” withdrawal of the US occupation troops from Iraq will lead to a religious civil war there serve the same purpose — attempting to discourage domestic support for the immediate withdrawal of all those troops.

According to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll released on March 6, “eight in 10 Americans believe that recent sectarian violence in Iraq has made civil war likely”, Reuters reported on March 7. The poll found that “fewer than 20 percent of respondents support an immediate withdrawal of all US troops”. However, 52% support a phased withdrawal over the coming year.

While the official White House line is to deny that Iraq is on the brink of a sectarian civil war, in the wake of the Samarra bombing at least one high-ranking US official has publicly given it credence.

In testimony to the US Senate armed services committee on March 3, John Negroponte, the US national intelligence director, warned that “if chaos were to descend upon Iraq or the forces of democracy [i.e., the US occupation forces] were to be defeated in that country ... this would have implications for the rest of the Middle East region and, indeed, the world”.

Negroponte was Washington’s ambassador in Iraq from June 2004 to April 2005 — precisely at the time that the recruitment of local death squads was being considered in Washington.

In January 2005, *Newsweek* magazine reported that the “Pentagon is intensively debating an option that dates back to a still-secret strategy in the Reagan administration’s battle against the leftist guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador in the early 1980s. Then, faced with a losing war against Salvadoran rebels, the US government funded or supported ‘nationalist’ forces that allegedly included so-called death squads directed to hunt down and kill rebel leaders and sympathizers.”

According to the *Newsweek* report, Pentagon chiefs were considering the recruitment of death squads from among SCIRI’s Badr militia, which had been incorporated into the US-recruited Iraqi security forces, to target Sunni resistance fighters and their sympathisers.

Negroponte would have been the man most qualified to supervise the implementation of such a death-squad program. While US ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985, he supervised the recruitment by the CIA of local death squads from the Honduran army and police, and the arming of Nicaragua’s anti-government contras.

Negroponte wasn’t the only veteran of Washington’s “dirty wars” in Central America to be brought into Iraq while the “Salvador option” was being considered. The November 16 New York *Newsday* reported that the interior ministry’s commando units had been built up “over the past year under guidance from James Steele, a former [US] Army Special Forces officer who led US counterinsurgency efforts in El Salvador in the 1980s. Salvadoran army units

trained by Steele's team were accused of a pattern of atrocities."

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