

The British Military in Iraq : A Legacy of War Crimes and Atrocities

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Global Research, September 03, 2010

3 September 2010

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

"Mine is the first generation able to contemplate the possibility that we may live our entire lives without going to war or sending our children to war." (Tony Blair, speech as newly elected Prime Minister, 1997.)

August is seemingly Spotlight on Illegal Invasion month. President Obama has made his Mission-Lost-Cause speech about US., Iraq fantasy "withdrawal" – leaving behind 50,000 troops, perhaps 50,000 mercenaries, and some have suggested 100,000 "advisors."

In context: "Last month, the Congressional Research Service reported that the Department of Defense workforce has 19 percent more contractors (207,600) than uniformed personnel ... in Iraq and Afghanistan, making these wars ... the most outsourced and privatized in US history. Worse, the oversight of contractors will rest with other contractors. As has been the case in Afghanistan, contractors will be sought to provide "operations-center monitoring of private security contractors (PSCs) as well as PSC inspection and accountability services."(1)

Tony "I would do it again" Blair, announced, on 16th August, he is to give his entire £4.6 million advance on his book: "My Journey", to the Royal British Legion, for support of British soldiers in need. As the ungracious calls for his "journey" to be to The Hague get louder – with some suggesting a far less civilized ordeal – it seems timely to assess British "achievements" in Iraq.

The British, of course, having come in flying the St George's flag on their vehicles (the Crusaders' flag) slithered out of Basra city, under cover of darkness, to hunker down at the fortified airport, some distance outside the town, in September 2007, much as US units did from other parts of Iraq, last week, fleeing in the night, over the border to Kuwait.

UK Forces, who had also illegally squatted in Basra Palace, as did their US counterparts in palaces throughout the country, taking over Iraq's cultural properties, additionally pillaging them, in defiance of the 1954 and 1977 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property. To use such buildings in support of military effort or as a command centre is specifically prohibited. The full extent of pillaging is unlikely to ever be documented, since no one was guarding the guards. An early British example was the theft of a statue of Saddam Hussein from Basra, for which the British tax payer paid the transport for its journey to the Unit's base in southern England.

Basra Palace was, however, handed back, after four and a half years, in a furtive ceremony at 1 a.m., local time. Most of the troops had already left, creeping out, to head for the desert road to the airport, from 10 p.m.

Alleged British atrocities began as Iraq had barely been declared “liberated.” One of their first recorded acts (after securing Basra oil installations) was less than a month after the invasion, in May 2003, when fifteen year old Ahmed Jaber Karheem, drowned, after allegedly being forced in to a canal in the former “Venice of the Middle East”, by Guardsmen Martin McGing, Joseph McCleary and Colour Sergeant Carle Selman.

The alleged action was to “teach him a lesson”, for suspected looting. Ahmed Jaber could not swim. In a case which took three years to come to court, Guardsman McCleary whinged that: “We were told to put looters in the canal. I was the lowest rank and we were told we weren’t paid to think. Just follow orders. I don’t know why the army went ahead with the prosecution ... We were scapegoats.” Nuremberg’s Principles apparently now irrelevant, and Iraqi lives presumably being cheap, they were acquitted.

Whilst there was undisputedly looting of food after the invasion, the population of Basra were almost entirely reliant on the government distributed rations. The British army “secured” the food warehouses, but distributed none.

Children were begging for any sustenance and for water, throughout the south, in a near famine situation for many. So people looted. No doubt the opportunist joined the desperate, but the situation created by the food-secure occupiers, was shameful. Looters were also shot by troops. Fathers, brothers, sons, faced death for trying to feed their families, or to make a bit of money in the reigning, invasion-generated, chaos.

When the British finally requested a shipment of water for the desperate population, delivered by the unfortunately named naval ship, “Sir Galahad”, they called in tankers, rather than deliver themselves. The water filled the tankers – to be contaminated with whatever it had previously transported – and was sold to those who could afford to buy. It is not known whether members of Her Majesty’s navy or army, also profited from this nice little earner.

The canal drowning Court case was finally heard in June 2006. That month, the army was being accused of shooting dead a thirteen year old, in a crowd accused of throwing stones.

Casual killing started early in the invasion. Corporal Russ Aston, who later died in an assault on a police station in Al Majar, wrote, in March 2003 : “ I’ve shot 4-5 Iraqis and one of them were quite young, about 14-15 ... I felt bad at the time, but I’m OK now.” In a call to his mother he reportedly said: “It’s just killing for killing’s sake out here ... I don’t know how I am going to cope with what I’ve seen.” (2)

A colleague talked of being on a night patrol and: “this f... flip flop had come out”, so he shot him dead. According to Amnesty, Wa’el Rahim Jabar: “.. was walking along the main street, with a Kalashnikov rifle slung over his right shoulder, accompanied by two (unarmed) friends”, it was dark, they did not realise there was a British patrol near by and he was shot in the chest and neck and killed instantly.

Carrying an ancient family weapon was a norm in rural areas, which had often become increasingly dangerous, even before the invasion, due often to embargo-generated desperation or criminality.

Iraqis were referred to by Britain’s “boys”, as: “stinking Arabs,”, “yip-yaps”, towel-heads”, “flip-flops”, and “crusties.” Beautiful, battered Basra, where very small children sold fruits

they had picked themselves, from the earliest light, along the Corniche, was referred to as a “viper’s nest”, by Major General Brims.

Aston’s colleague, Sergeant Simon Hamilton-Jewell, who was also to die at Al Majar, wrote home, with excitement, of capturing three: “Ba’ath Party members.” Ignorance clearly reigned. It was near impossible to get work in Iraq, during Saddam Hussein’s leadership, without signing up, whatever the individual’s views on Ba’athism (pan-Arabism.) “I had them lying on the floor (of a vehicle) handcuffs, sandbags on their heads and my shooter pointing straight at their heads ...” So much for the Geneva Convention.

It is not known whether two of those, were the men, arrested by Hamilton-Jewell in March 2003, accused, but never tried by the British, held in solitary confinement, allegedly subject to sleep deprivation, extreme heat, arbitrary body searches and physical abuse. A full three years after they were arrested, they were accused of the deaths of two British soldiers, and finally handed over to the Iraqi authorities for trial in 2008, at risk of torture and hanging.

In March 2010, due to the tireless work of Phil Shiner, of the UK’s Birmingham based Public Interest lawyers, the two were unanimously awarded compensation for their: “mental suffering, fear of execution (amounting to) inhuman treatment”, by the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg. The British government and Foreign Office came in for some salutary criticism.

Just after the US-dominated, UN Security Council, approved the US and UK having interim control of Iraq, on 22nd May 2003, the deliverer of the “fine document” of fictional claims – cited by Colin Powell, at the UN, to justify the invasion – Attorney Anthony Blair, pitched up in Basra, the first “coalition” leader to visit troops.

The: “minimum loss of civilian life”, their superb restraint, was now: “famous around the world .. ” he said. The troops actions were, he continued: “ ... a model of how armed forces anywhere in the world should conduct themselves ...”.

By this time, the family of eleven year old Memmon Salam al-Maliki, had been looking for him for three weeks. On the 29th April 2003, Memmon was injured by unexploded munitions abandoned by the British, near his Basra home, which locals had begged them to remove, piles scattered everywhere. He lost one hand, fingers of the other and injured his right eye. Picked up by a passing British patrol, it seems he was given first aid, then transferred to the British base hospital at Shuaiba. Memmon was among numbers of children reportedly injured by this lethal, casually abandoned legacy. His parents have not seen him since the British army’s intervention.

The British in Basra, told his father he had been transferred to an American military hospital in Kuwait. They had, apparently, neither documentation, or knowledge of the location of the hospital. Without his parents knowledge and permission, they seemingly admit that Memmon was transferred, across an international border, to another country – and vanished. The US authorities, however, deny all knowledge of him or any paper trail. Seven years later, his family are still looking, still distraught.

In their last letter from the Ministry of Defence, dated October 2005, the department’s chief claims officer told their lawyer that the British consulate in Basra had also failed to locate the boy. “I am sorry to say that the subsequent investigation was inconclusive and the whereabouts of your client’s son remain unknown, following his transfer to an American field

hospital in Kuwait”, according to papers seen by the (London) Guardian

The British Ministry of Defence: “began to regard the family’s appeals as claims for compensation”, expressing sympathy, but denying all liability. Seven and a half years later, Liam Fox, Britain’s current Defence Minister – latest in a woeful bunch – has ordered: “an urgent enquiry.”

Perhaps the most detailed account of the treatment of Iraqis by the British forces can be found in the legal Inquiry (3) in to the death of Baha Mousa (26) a receptionist at Basra’s Haitham Hotel. The father of two, whose 22 year old wife had recently died of cancer, was arrested with nine others, on 14th September 2003, by personnel of the 1st Battalion, The Queen’s Lancashire Regiment. Two days later he was dead, with “at least” ninety three injuries to his body, including fractured ribs and a broken nose.

A post-mortem found he had suffered cardio-respiratory arrest, i.e., : he had been asphyxiated. When his father Daoud Mousa, a Colonel in the Basra Police Force, saw the state of his son’s body, “horrified”, he burst in to tears. Light shone in the darkest places, again, the result of the deceptively mildly mannered, bull terrier-like lawyer, Phil Shiner.(4) Shiner is currently acting for seventy Iraqis claiming torture and mistreatment by British soldiers. His legal practise is not alone.

A former fellow detainee with Baha Mousa alleged, at London’s High Court, that soldiers had competed to see who could kick them the furthest. Another survivor, Kifa Taha al-Mutari, in a witness statement, said he and others were “beaten, hooded and our hands were wired.”

Hooding was deemed to constitute torture, by the United Nations Committee Against Torture in 1997, a fact brought to the attention of the relevant British personnel in Basra by 4th April 2003. Baha Mousa was held hooded for over twenty three hours. (See 3 .) Britain is both a signatory to the UN Commission and banned hooding under domestic law in the 1970’s.

Whilst looters could be shot, the Inquiry transcript shows some questionable commandeering by the liberators. “The first arrest operation had yielded three Ba’athists who had 11 million dinars in three large bags in their house. Whilst I was keen to follow Geneva Convention rules and allow them to take this with them to the interrogation centre, I decided I could borrow a few thousand for use in the local market — to demonstrate an element of trust and willingness to restore normality!”

Iraqis know instability, and in times of turmoil, expecting looting, all cash and life’s savings are removed from banks and taken home for safer keeping. Three bags may well have represented all the three men had, equivalent of a few thousand pounds, to keep them and their families for however long the chaos lasted.

At the Al Haitham Hotel, as well as rounding up Mr Mousa and his colleagues, Britain’s finest, reportedly, rounded up the contents of the safe.

In another incident, it was recorded that : “He was interrogated along with his associates ... after some very disconcerting ‘conditioning.’ Marines bashed corrugated iron with sticks for several hours. This was to maintain the shock of capture and encourage them to talk. It became apparent just how frightened these men must have been, when two of them pissed themselves.”

One young Iraqi was subject to a mock execution, by soldiers pouring what they said was petrol over him, from a jerry can, and threatening to set him alight. Another youth had a gun forced in to his mouth.

Deaths at the hands of the army, disputed by the Ministry of Defence, include twenty Iraqis, which witnesses claimed were taken to the British base at Amara, on 14th May 2004. Undisputed is that the next day twenty bodies were returned to their families. Injuries alleged included evidence of torture, mutilation, removal of eyes, and stab wounds, according to lawyers.

Further: "There were several instances of prisoners ... being injured after capture ... it rendered the prisoner unfit for tactical questioning." Quite some injuries, if they were rendered speechless, it is possible to speculate. Detainees were held in a "prisoner of war cage." Chillingly : "Prisoners should arrive .. 'bagged and tagged.' " (i.e.: hooded and handcuffed.) So much for the United Nations Committee on Torture.

In all, prisoner handling was cited as : "Abysmal" and : "Fundamentally flawed." Communication was problematical: they lacked interpreters.

Numerous claims, seemingly week on week, year on year, of British occupation inhumanity, include a twenty three years old security guard, Adil Abba Fadhil Mohammed, who alleges beating with rifle butts, kicking and sexual abuse by male and female soldiers, being made to strip, and being photographed by laughing male and female soldiers. Claims by others include rape, electrocution and sexual humiliation, descriptions of which, should carry a health warning.

Another claim is of the alleged torture and execution of sixty two year old Sabiha Khudur Talib, claimed by her son to be taken away by British soldiers, hit on her back with a rifle butt, and bundled in to a personnel carrier. Her body was found on Basra's al-Zubayr highway, in a British army body bag. Basra police describe: "traces of torture and a bullet wound to the abdomen." "The evidence points to a brutal murder ..", says Phil Shiner.

In October 2009, an army whistle-blower spoke to investigative reporter Donal MacIntyre, he had spent much of his career in the Royal Military Police Special Investigations Branch. He finally left believing that he was: "serving something that was party to covering up quite serious allegations of torture and murder", he commented.

"I've seen documentary evidence that there were incidents, running in to the hundreds, involving death and serious injury to Iraqis. It is the actions of a few who have shown to be bad apples. But the system is so flawed, and some of the decision making has been so perverse, that it is fair to say that the barrel is probably rotten."

In 2009, when the British finally left Iraq, their Commanding Officer saluted their bravery and told them: "We have prepared the ground for continued success ... We leave knowing that Basra is a better place now than it was in 2003."

It takes, as ever, William Blum on Iraq, to cut through this and the rest of the delusional nonsense, including that from "Peace Envoy" Blair, and utterly unworthy Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Obama, this week. Britain and America:

"... killed wantonly, tortured ... the people of that unhappy land have lost everything — their homes, their schools, their electricity, their clean water, their environment, their

neighborhoods, their mosques, their archaeology, their jobs, their careers, their professionals, their state-run enterprises, their physical health, their mental health, their health care, their welfare state, their women's rights, their religious tolerance, their safety, their security, their children, their parents, their past, their present, their future, their lives ...

More than half the population either dead, wounded, traumatized, in prison, internally displaced, or in foreign exile ... The air, soil, water, blood and genes drenched with depleted uranium ... the most awful birth defects ... unexploded cluster bombs lie in wait for children to pick them up ... a river of blood runs alongside the Euphrates and Tigris ... through a country that may never be put back together again." (5)

Notes

1. <http://www.truth-out.org/another-false-ending-contracting-out-iraq-occupation62883>
2. Last Round, Mark Nichol, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2005.
3. Full transcript:
http://www.bahamousainquiry.org/linkedfiles/baha_mousa/hearings/transcripts/20090723day8fulldayredacted.pdf
4. <http://www.publicinterestlawyers.co.uk/general/about.php>
5. <http://www.killinghope.org/bblum6/aer85.html> (Anti-Empire Report, September 1, 2010)

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