

Private Justice

Author: [Meitham Jassem](#)

Frustrated by the failure of coalition authorities to arrest criminals and former Ba'athists, some Iraqis are taking matters into their own hands.

An hour after the killing, the blood still lay in a black-purple puddle in the middle of the road. British soldiers stood with their weapons at the ready as an Iraqi police officer questioned eyewitnesses. To one side of the road, barefoot and flushed with rage, the victim's brother-in-law shouted, "The people stood by and let him be killed because they hated him!"

Hashim Raisan Hassan, 30, was shot dead at 7.30 am by four men driving through the down-at-heel Basra suburb of Gurmat Ali. He was a member of the Fedayeen of Saddam, the brutal militia that put up unexpectedly fierce resistance to the British and Americans troops who invaded southern Iraq in late March to overthrow the Iraqi president. When Basra fell to the British, the leaders of the Fedayeen fled the city. Some of the smaller fish, like Hassan, put on civilian clothes and tried to melt back into their community.

"Many people suffered because of him," said a neighbour. "He even arrested one of his own friends - then stole his furniture and set fire to his house. People are beginning to take justice into their own hands, using the same means that Saddam once used against them."

Yet the police officer at the scene of the crime, Lt. Haidar Mohsen, appeared to condone the killing. "He killed a lot of people," he said. "He deserved to die."

Hassan was one of two Ba'athists murdered in Basra in the space of barely an hour on a single day this month. In central Basra, barely 30 minutes after Hassan was killed, four men in a pick-up truck shot dead Col. Abdul Razzaq, a former officer in Saddam's internal security service. After the war, Razzaq, a father of seven, changed his clothes and became a traffic policeman. He was ambushed as he drove to work. Two bystanders were wounded in the shooting, one of them seriously.

When Saddam Hussein's 35-year rule of terror collapsed in early April, the cutting edge of his regime - senior Ba'ath Party and intelligence service operatives, the Fedayeen and most of the elite Republican Guards - disappeared without a trace. Two months later, Iraq remains without a government and its American overseers have not indicated how or when - or even if - there will be justice for Saddam's victims.

In many places, the quick appointment of Ba'athists to post-war office led many Iraqis to believe that the occupying forces were willing to tolerate the very people who had abused them for more than three decades. When British troops first took control of Basra, for example, they appointed two senior Ba'athists to run the city - one of them a man widely accused of having been one of Saddam's torturers. The appointments were overturned after loud popular protest.

As a result, some Iraqis are beginning to take the law into their own hands - especially in Kurdish and Shia areas, where Saddam's oppression was exceptionally harsh. When his regime collapsed, most of its institutions collapsed with it. Two months after the war ended, Basra has an embryonic, reformed police force and a functioning court, but Iraqi police say the British forces' operating rules often frustrate their efforts to get criminals off the street.

"The British haven't done their best to make the city safe," said an Iraqi who works as a translator with the British army and asked not to be identified. "They refuse to be called out during the overnight curfew hours, and so criminals know they can act with impunity during that time. Our police arrest people for crimes like killing, rape and kidnapping, but the British release them after 12 hours if they have not found

the proof by then."

Police Sergeant Hadi Jaafar Hussein gave several examples of men who were arrested on suspicion of murder but released the following day, only to kill again within a relatively short period. He said one suspected murderer shot up the police station where he had been held after he was released. Another threatened to kill his arresting officer when he met him by chance on the street.

"Many of us are afraid to walk in the street in our uniforms in case we are mistaken for Ba'athists, Sergeant Hussein said. "In Basra, killings like this happen every day."

Meitham Jassem is a student and translator.

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