

Query response a-7220 of 28 April 2010

Iraq: Battlefield execution committees mostly operating during the Iran-Iraq war and allegedly under the authority of the Ba'ath Party or military command

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)*.

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Please read in full all documents referred to.

Non-English language information is comprehensively summarised in English. Original language quotations are provided for reference.

In his book on the occupation of Iraq published in 2007, Ali Allawi mentions the use of execution squads to stop front-line soldiers from retreating in battle during the Iran-Iraq war:

"The Iran-Iraq War provided further justification of state interest to explain away the regime's violations. Thus, the displacement of people in the Iranian borderlands, or the use of execution squads to stop front-line soldiers from retreating in battle, were seen as perfectly justifiable measures in a national emergency." (Allawi, 2007, p. 144)

In an article published at the Washington Post website on 9 February 1991, Rick Atkinson reports that Iraqi prisoners in Saudi custody have claimed that Iraq has formed "execution battalions" to punish deserters during Operation Desert Storm. In the article it is mentioned that similar Iraqi units called "punishment battalions" had been operating during the Iran-Iraq war:

"Moreover, Lt. Gen. Khalid bin Sultan, commander of the Arab forces in Operation Desert Storm, yesterday said some of the 936 Iraqi prisoners in Saudi custody have reported the formation of Iraqi 'execution battalions' to punish deserters. Khalid, who is the son of the Saudi defense minister, acknowledged a lack of hard evidence that actual executions have taken place. Similar Iraqi units, called 'punishment battalions,' operated during the Iran-Iraq war, according to author Dilip Hiro." (Washington Post, 9 February 1991)

In his book on the Iran-Iraq war published in 1991, Dilip Hero mentions "Punishment Corps" operating in the rear lines of the battlefield:

"Saddam Hussein decreed in September 1983 that soldierly culture and thought should be spread among government and Baath Party officials. Conversely, stiff punishment awaited those who failed on the battlefield, however high their rank – a job performed by the specially appointed 'Punishment Corps' operating in the rear lines." (Hiro, 1991, p. 109)

Among the sources consulted by ACCORD within time constraints no further information could be found on the subject of battlefield execution committees operating during the Iran-Iraq war. However, there was more information relating to "execution battalions" during the Gulf war in 1991 (Operation Desert Storm) and to "execution squads" during the Iraq war in 2003:

The New York Times (NYT) and the Los Angeles Times report on the organisation of Iraqi "execution battalions" during Operation Desert Storm, both referring to claims of Prince Khalid bin Sultan, commander of the Joint Arab Forces in the Gulf War:

„The Saudi officer, Lieut. Gen. Prince Khalid bin Sultan, commander of the Joint Arab Forces, said more Iraqi soldiers might desert were it not for what he called 'execution battalions' who punish troops considering defection. He quoted prisoners of war as having said such units were attached to the elite Republican Guards and to Iraqi forces in southern Kuwait." (NYT, 9 February 1991)

"Iraq has organized 'execution battalions' to punish soldiers attempting to desert on the battlefield, the commander of Saudi and other Arab forces in the Persian Gulf War said today. Prince Khalid bin Sultan said information about the death units came from prisoners of war and indicated the units probably have killed Iraqi soldiers. He quoted POWs [prisoners of war] as saying there also were special agents and informers in the Iraqi ranks to report on soldiers who might be planning to abandon their posts, and it was impossible for would-be deserters to know whom they can trust." (Los Angeles Times, 8 February 1991)

In the News Briefing of the United States Central Command published by the Federal News Service on 10 February 1991, Brigadier General Richard Neal from the US Marines comments on the "Execution Battalion" mentioned by Prince Khalid:

"[Question:] A couple of days ago, Prince Khalid told us about an execution battalion or battalions, it wasn't quite clear whether there was one or more than one attached to the Republican Guard. Would it be possible to find out from prisoners of war exactly where these units were located and would you consider giving them special attention?"

Gen. Neal: I'm not familiar with the term 'Execution Battalion.' But I can say from our debriefs of the EPWs [enemy prisoners of war] that, in fact, there has been reports that there are Republican Guards spread throughout the front line forces as a hedge to keep people from deserting to the south. It is a well advertised fact, coming from our debriefings of the EPWs, that there are these Republican Guards there with one mission in mind, which is to stop the forward movement of people that want to defect or desert to the western or coalition forces. That may be what General Khalid was alluding to as the Execution Forces because, as the name would imply, if they see someone coming, they're probably going to take care of them. [...]

[Question:] General, wouldn't it be desirable for you to identify where these Execution Battalions are located, to target them especially in an attempt to encourage more defections?

Gen. Neal: Desirable, maybe, but maybe very difficult. A battalion on a battlefield as big as we're talking about is probably, I guess, to use a term, a mosquito on an elephant. It's just -- it's too -- that's too small an entity I think for us, especially a mobile entity where, as I understand it -- as I said, I'm not familiar with the term except I heard it in the newsprint on the Execution Battalion. We have heard of cases where there are Republican Guards-like outposts, like maybe two or three people, on main avenues of approach, watching for deserters coming south with no -- you know, they're not part of a unit formation or anything, they're just coming with and without weapons, with the idea and the intent of turning themselves over to coalition forces. And so, I think probably you would be - it would be speculation on my part if we could target those types of things." (Federal News Service, 10 February 1991)

In another News Briefing on 12 February 1991, Brigadier General Richard Neal talks about confirmation of the execution battalions mentioned by General Khalid:

"[...] Iraq continues to disregard the Geneva Convention and also the International Commission of the Red Cross attempts to learn about the status of any of the detainees they may have. We still get reports through our debriefings of the EPWs [enemy prisoners of war] of many units experience low morale due to the continuous bombing campaign, and we do get confirmation of what I spoke to last night and what General Khalid had mentioned, these -- although I haven't been familiar with the term 'execution battalions' they still are people wandering through the units in squad-type formations, executing those that are listening to prohibited channels, radio channels, or trying to escape to the South or leaving their assigned areas. [...]" (Federal News Service, 12 February 1991)

In his statement of April 2003 to the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, Tom Malinowski, Washington Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), mentions execution squads who have allegedly been executing Iraqi civilians and soldiers perceived as disloyal to the regime during the Iraq war in 2003:

"Execution Squads: Security forces loyal to Saddam Hussein have allegedly been executing Iraqi civilians and soldiers perceived as disloyal to the regime. If true, this constitutes a war crime. Security forces have also extrajudicially executed alleged army deserters -- while not a war crime, such acts are probably unlawful under Iraqi law and are clearly human rights violations. Last week in Iraqi Kurdistan, Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 Iraqi soldiers who had deserted their units. Some said they knew of execution squads of 10-12 men drawn from regular armed forces and from Military Intelligence, though they had not seen executions themselves. One eyewitness to an execution said that on March 26, ten deserters were brought to an open field where a colonel had gathered other units to witness the execution. 'This is what happens to betrayers of our nation,' the colonel told the assembled troops, according to the witness. He then began shooting the alleged deserters one by one; other members of the execution squad joined in. The colonel then ordered the bodies to be dragged up onto a hillside so the soldiers would have a better

view of the corpses. Some of the Iraqi soldiers described inhumane punishments including being beaten, or being forced to crawl across stones on their bare knees or backs. One showed the scars on his back from this punishment. Their officers frequently warned them that they would be executed if they tried to escape." (HRW, 10 April 2003, p. 2)

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