

Blackwater mercenaries on trial in US court for 2007 Iraq massacre

By Kate Randall
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Nearly seven years later, four former mercenaries of Blackwater Worldwide are on trial in US court on charges stemming from a September 2007 attack that left 14 Iraqis dead and wounded 18 others in Baghdad's Nisour Square.

In the trial that began June 11 in US District Court in Washington, DC, Nicholas Slatten is accused of first-degree murder, and Dustin Heard, Evan Liberty and Paul Slough are on trial for voluntary manslaughter, attempted manslaughter and gun charges.

If convicted, Slatten could be sentenced to life in prison, while the other defendants face a mandatory minimum sentence of 30 years if convicted of the gun charge and at least one other charge. The former Blackwater guards have pled not guilty to all charges. The US Justice Department dropped charges against a fifth guard and a sixth reached a plea deal.

The events of September 16, 2007 have come to be emblematic of the brutal repression of the Iraqi people at the hands of the US military and its private contractor accomplices in years of neocolonial repression. An Iraqi government probe, as well as independent investigations by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, have already determined that the Blackwater mercenaries' attack was unprovoked, and that they fired on unarmed civilians.

The FBI is coordinating arrangements for more than four dozen Iraqi citizens, including relatives of those killed in the attack, to travel to Washington in the coming months to testify in a trial expected to last months. US authorities refused Iraqi government demands for the Blackwater guards to stand trial in Iraq, and charges were dropped in 2009 before being reinstated in 2011 by a US federal appeals court.

In the prosecution's opening statements, Assistant

US Attorney T. Patrick Martin said some of the victims were "simply trying to get out" of the way of the gunfire of the Blackwater guards. He said that immediately after the guards got back to their base, they began circulating the lie that there were insurgents in the area that posed a threat to the security contractors.

Martin said that it took four days for the US State Department, which had hired Blackwater to protect its diplomats in Baghdad, to arrive on the scene to investigate the shootings. He said their investigation was haphazard and incomplete and that "most of all it seemed bent on clearing the contractors" of any wrongdoing.

Martin displayed graphic photos and video of the scene in Baghdad on the day of the shootings, including a picture he described as that of motorist Ahmed Haithem Ahmed Al Rubia'y, who was the first to be shot in the head. Blackwater's Slatten is charged with first-degree murder in his death.

The *Times* reported on the government's first witness, Mohammed Hafedh Abdulrazzaq Kinani, who broke down on the witness stand last week as he recounted how his nine-year-old son Ali was shot in the head while riding in the back seat of the family car.

Mr. Kinani sobbed so uncontrollably that presiding Judge Royce C. Lamberth sent the jury out of the room. One juror, who said she had been too haunted by witnesses' testimony to sleep, was excused by the judge from service.

The Blackwater mercenaries' defense maintains that the guards acted in self-defense and were fired upon by what they perceived to be possible suicide car bombers. However, according to the *New York Times* report of the incident published October 3, 2007, the car carrying the first people to be killed did not approach the

Blackwater convoy in the square until the driver—subsequently identified as Ahmed Haithem Ahmed—had been shot in the head and lost control of the vehicle.

Also testifying last week was Sarhan Deab Abdul Moniem, who was a traffic officer when the convoy of Blackwater trucks pulled into his traffic circle in Nisour Square and started shooting. Speaking through an interpreter, Moniem recalled how he ran to a white Kia sedan, where Mahassin Kadhim, Ahmed Haithem Ahmed's mother, cradled her dead son's head on her shoulder.

"I asked her to open up the door so I could help her," Moniem said. "But she was paying attention only to her son." Mrs. Kadhim was apparently shot as she held her son in her arms. The car then caught fire after the Blackwater guards fired some type of grenade into the vehicle. Ahmed's father later counted 40 bullet holes in the car.

An initial burst of gunfire was followed by a torrent of bullets unleashed by the mercenaries, even as the Iraqi civilians were turning their vehicles around and attempting to flee. No witnesses to the shootings have reported gunfire coming from Iraqis in and around the square.

Fareed Walid Hassan, a truck driver, told the *Times* in 2007, "The shooting started like rain; everyone escaped his car." He said he saw a woman dragging her child's body. "He was around 10 or 11. He was dead. She was pulling him by one hand to get him away. She hoped that he was still alive."

According to the 2007 Iraqi government investigation, Blackwater helicopters flying overhead also fired into cars, leaving bullet holes in car roofs. According to the Iraqi probe, in a separate shooting several minutes later, a Blackwater convoy, possibly the same one, moved north and fired on another line of traffic.

According to the Associated Press, the Blackwater mercenaries' defense plans to call an expert witness who will "testify about the use of force in combat situations and the general threat level in Baghdad at the time of the shootings." Another defense witness will testify that absolute proof of a perceived deadly or imminent threat is not required for a contractor to respond with deadly force.

At the height of the Iraq war, there were an estimated

20,000 to 30,000 security contractors employed by the US in its occupation. The activities of Blackwater and other private mercenaries were seamlessly integrated into the operations of the US State department and military. The September 2007 massacre was only one of the most publicized and egregious of the crimes of the Blackwater guards, who acted with impunity and with the support of the US government in terrorizing the Iraqi population.

In an effort to distance itself from its murderous operations in Iraq—particularly the 2007 massacre in the nation's capital—Blackwater renamed itself Xe in 2009, and then Academi in 2011. According to recent German media reports, the US mercenary company is presently active directing the repression of pro-Russian protesters in eastern Ukraine by the fascist forces of the NATO puppet regime installed in Kiev.

In an operation receiving little attention in the US media, the giant military contractor is reportedly coordinating the attacks by the fascist Right Sector militia, the Kiev regime's National Guard, along with groups of football hooligans, leading to hundreds of casualties across east Ukraine.

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