

Why Is Obama Still Using Blackwater?

by **JEREMY SCAHILL**

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Two years ago on September 16, 2007, on a steamy hot Baghdad day with temperatures reaching 100 degrees, a heavily armed Blackwater convoy entered a congested intersection at Nisour Square in the Mansour district of the Iraqi capital. The once-upscale section of Baghdad was still lined with boutiques, cafes and art galleries dating back to better days. The ominous caravan consisted of four large armored vehicles with machine guns mounted on top.

As the Blackwater convoy was entering the square that day, a young Iraqi medical student named Ahmed Hathem Al-Rubaie was driving his mother, Mahasin, in the family's white sedan. As fate would have it, they found themselves stuck near Nisour Square. The family were devout Muslims and were fasting in observance of the holy month of Ramadan.

Ali Khalaf Salman, an Iraqi traffic cop on duty in Nisour Square that day, remembers vividly when the Blackwater convoy entered the intersection, spurring him and his colleagues to scramble to stop traffic. But as the Mambas entered the square, the convoy suddenly made a surprise U-turn and proceeded to drive the wrong way on a one-way street. As Khalaf watched, the convoy came to an abrupt halt. He says a large white man with a mustache, positioned atop the third vehicle in the Blackwater convoy, began to fire his weapon "randomly."

Khalaf looked in the direction of the shots, on Yarmouk Road, and heard a woman screaming, "My son! My son!" The police officer sprinted toward the voice and found a middle-aged woman inside of a vehicle holding a 20-year-old man covered in blood, who had been shot in the forehead. "I tried to help the young man, but his mother was holding him so tight," Khalaf recalled. Another Iraqi policeman, Sarhan Thiab, also ran to the car. "We tried to help him," Thiab said. "I saw the left side of his head was destroyed and his mother was crying out: 'My son, my son. Help me, help me.'"

Officer Khalaf recalled looking toward the Blackwater shooters. "I raised my left arm high in the air to try to signal to the convoy to stop the shooting." He says he thought the men would cease fire, given that he was a clearly identified police officer. The young man's body was still in the driver's seat of the automatic vehicle and, as Khalaf and Thiab stood there, it began to roll forward, perhaps as a result of the dead man's foot remaining on the accelerator. Blackwater guards later said they initially opened fire on the vehicle because it was speeding and would not stop, a claim hotly disputed by scores of witnesses. Aerial photos of the scene later showed that the car had not even entered the traffic circle when it was fired upon by Blackwater, while the *New York Times* **reported**, "The car in which the first people were killed did not begin to closely approach the Blackwater convoy until the Iraqi driver had been shot in the head and lost control of his vehicle," meaning Blackwater had already shot the man. "I tried to use hand signals to make the Blackwater people understand that the car was moving on its own and we were trying to stop it. We were trying to get the woman out but had to run for cover," Thiab said.

"Don't shoot, please," Khalaf recalled yelling. But as he stood with his hand raised, Khalaf says a gunman

from the fourth Blackwater vehicle opened fire on the mother gripping her son and shot her dead before Khalaf's and Thiabs' eyes. "I saw parts of the woman's head flying in front of me, blow up," Thiab said. "They immediately opened heavy fire at us." Within moments, so many shots had been fired at the car from "big machine guns" that Khalaf says it exploded, engulfing the bodies inside in flames, melting their flesh into one. "Each of their four vehicles opened heavy fire in all directions, they shot and killed everyone in cars facing them and people standing on the street," Thiab recalled. "When it was over we were looking around and about fifteen cars had been destroyed, the bodies of the killed were strewn on the pavements and road." When later asked by US investigators why he never fired at the Blackwater men, Khalaf told them, "I am not authorized to shoot, and my job is to look after the traffic."

The victims were later identified as Ahmed Hathem Al-Rubaie and his mother, Mahasin. That attack on Ahmed and Mahasin's vehicle would be the beginning of a fifteen-minute shooting spree that would leave seventeen Iraqis dead and more than twenty wounded.

One of the Blackwater "shooters" that day, Jeremy Ridgeway, later admitted in sworn testimony, that he had killed Mahasin by firing "multiple rounds" into her vehicle and that "there was no attempt to provide reasonable warning."

After Ahmed and Mahasin's vehicle exploded, sustained gunfire rang out in Nisour Square as people fled for their lives. In addition to the Blackwater shooters in the four Mambas, witnesses say gunfire came from Blackwater's Little Bird helicopters. "The helicopters began shooting on the cars," officer Khalaf said. "The helicopters shot and killed the driver of a Volkswagen and wounded a passenger" who escaped by "rolling out of the car into the street," he said. Witnesses described a horrifying scene of indiscriminate shooting by the Blackwater guards. "It was a horror movie," said officer Khalaf. "It was catastrophic," said Zina Fadhil, a 21-year-old pharmacist who survived the attack. "So many innocent people were killed."

Another Iraqi officer on the scene, Hussam Abdul Rahman, said that people who attempted to flee their vehicles were targeted. "Whoever stepped out of his car was shot at immediately," he said.

"I saw women and children jump out of their cars and start to crawl on the road to escape being shot," said Iraqi lawyer Hassan Jabar Salman, who was shot four times in the back during the incident. "But still the firing kept coming and many of them were killed. I saw a boy of about 10 leaping in fear from a minibus--he was shot in the head. His mother was crying out for him. She jumped out after him, and she was killed."

Salman says he was driving behind the Blackwater convoy when it stopped. Witnesses say some sort of explosion had gone off in the distance, too far away to have been perceived as a threat. He said Blackwater guards ordered him to turn his vehicle around and leave the scene. Shortly after, the shooting began. "Why had they opened fire?" he asked. "I do not know. No one--I repeat no one--had fired at them. The foreigners had asked us to go back, and I was going back in my car, so there was no reason for them to shoot." In all, he says, his car was hit twelve times, including the four bullets that pierced his back.

Ridgeway, the Blackwater operative, admitted that he and the other Blackwater operatives "opened fire with automatic weapons and grenade launchers on unarmed civilians." None of the victims that day "was an insurgent," he said, adding that "many were shot while inside of civilian vehicles that were attempting to flee." Ridgeway said one Iraqi was shot "while standing in the street with his hands up."

Mohammed Abdul Razzaq and his 9-year-old-son, Ali, were in a vehicle immediately behind Ahmed and Mahasin, the first victims that day. "We were six persons in the car--me, my son, my sister and her three

sons. The four children were in the back seat." He recalled that the Blackwater forces had "gestured stop, so we all stopped.... It's a secure area so we thought it will be the usual, we would stop for a bit as convoys pass. Shortly after that they opened heavy fire randomly at the cars with no exception." He said his vehicle "was hit by about thirty bullets, everything was damaged, the engine, the windshield the back windshield and the tires.

"When the shooting started, I told everybody to get their heads down. I could hear the children screaming in fear. When the shooting stopped, I raised my head and heard my nephew shouting at me 'Ali is dead, Ali is dead.' "

"My son was sitting behind me," he said. "He was shot in the head and his brains were all over the back of the car." Razzaq remembered, "When I held him, his head was badly wounded, but his heart was still beating. I thought there was a chance and I rushed him to the hospital. The doctor told me that he was clinically dead and the chance of his survival was very slim. One hour later, Ali died." Razzaq, who survived the shooting, later returned to the scene and gathered the pieces of his son's skull and brains with his hands, wrapped them in cloth and took them to be buried in the Shiite holy city of Najaf. "I can still smell the blood, my son's blood, on my fingers," Razzaq said two weeks after his son died.

In all, the melee reportedly lasted about fifteen minutes. In an indication of how out of control the situation quickly became, US officials report that "one or more" Blackwater guards called on their colleagues to stop shooting. The word cease-fire "was supposedly called out several times," a senior official told the *New York Times*. "They had an on-site difference of opinion." At one point a Blackwater guard allegedly drew his gun on another. "It was a Mexican standoff," said one contractor. According to an Iraqi lawyer who was in the square that day, the Blackwater guard screamed at his colleague, "No! No! No!" The Iraqi lawyer himself was shot in the back as he tried to flee.

As the heavy gunfire died down, witnesses say some sort of smoke bomb was set off in the square, perhaps to give cover for the Blackwater Mambas to leave, a common practice of security convoys. Iraqis also said the Blackwater forces fired shots as they withdrew from the square. "Even as they were withdrawing, they were shooting randomly to clear the traffic," said an Iraqi officer who witnessed the shootings in Nisour Square.

Within hours, Blackwater would become a household name the world over, as word of the massacre spread. Blackwater claimed its forces had been "violently attacked" and "acted lawfully and appropriately" and "heroically defended American lives in a war zone." "The 'civilians' reportedly fired upon by Blackwater professionals were in fact armed enemies." In less than twenty-four hours, the killings at Nisour Square would cause the worst diplomatic crisis to date between Washington and its own puppet regime in Baghdad. Though its forces had been at the center of some of the bloodiest moments of the war, Blackwater had largely existed in the shadows. Four years after Blackwater's first boots hit the ground in Iraq, it was yanked out of the darkness. Nisour Square would send Erik Prince down the fateful path to international infamy.

Jeremy Ridgeway later pled guilty to one count of manslaughter. Five other Blackwater guards have been indicted on manslaughter and other charges for their role at Nisour Square that day. Blackwater forces "fired at innocent Iraqis not because they actually believed that they were in imminent danger of serious bodily injury and actually believed that they had no alternative to the use of deadly force, but rather...because of their hostility toward Iraqis and their grave indifference to the harm that their actions would cause," US prosecutors allege. "The defendants specifically intended to kill or seriously injure the Iraqi civilians that they fired upon at [Nisour] Square." Prosecutors also allege that "defendant Nicholas

Slatten made statements that he wanted to kill as many Iraqis as he could as 'payback for 9/11,' and he repeatedly boasted about the number of Iraqis he had shot." Blackwater's owner, Erik Prince, has faced no consequences for the actions of his forces.

Two years to the day after the Nisour Square massacre, Blackwater remains in Iraq, armed and dangerous. As *The Nation* has **reported**, the Obama administration recently extended the company's contract there indefinitely. Blackwater has big-money contracts in Afghanistan as well, working for the State Department, the Defense Department and the CIA. As in Iraq, Blackwater forces are alleged to have shot and killed innocent civilians there. We now know that Blackwater was hired as part of the secret CIA assassination program that former Vice President Dick Cheney ordered concealed from Congress and that the company continues to work for the CIA as part of its drone bombing campaign in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A former Blackwater employee, known as John Doe #2, recently alleged in a **sworn statement** originally obtained by *The Nation* that Erik Prince, "views himself as a Christian crusader tasked with eliminating Muslims and the Islamic faith from the globe," and that Prince's companies "encouraged and rewarded the destruction of Iraqi life." Prince, the former employee charged, "intentionally deployed to Iraq certain men who shared his vision of Christian supremacy, knowing and wanting these men to take every available opportunity to murder Iraqis. Many of these men used call signs based on the Knights of the Templar, the warriors who fought the Crusades.... Prince's executives would openly speak about going over to Iraq to 'lay Hajjis out on cardboard.' Going to Iraq to shoot and kill Iraqis was viewed as a sport or game. Mr. Prince's employees openly and consistently used racist and derogatory terms for Iraqis and other Arabs, such as 'ragheads' or 'hajjis.' "

Another former Blackwater employee, an ex-US Marine, charged in a sworn statement that "Blackwater was smuggling weapons into Iraq." He states that he personally witnessed weapons being "pulled out" from dog food bags. Doe #2 alleges that "Prince and his employees arranged for the weapons to be polywrapped and smuggled into Iraq on Mr. Prince's private planes, which operated under the name Presidential Airlines," adding that Prince "generated substantial revenues from participating in the illegal arms trade."

Meanwhile, a new lawsuit has been filed against Prince by four Iraqis who claim they were shot by Blackwater operatives a week before Nisour Square on September 9, 2007. According to Susan Burke, the lawyer for the Iraqis who works with the Center for Constitutional Rights, Prince runs the operations of his "heavily armed private army" in Iraq and elsewhere from a twenty-four-hour command center known as the "war room." Burke also alleges that in Iraq "Prince's private army of men went 'night hunting' on more than one occasion. This 'night hunting' entailed Mr. Prince's men, armed with night goggles and riding in Mr. Prince's wholly-owned helicopters after 10 pm over the streets of Baghdad, killing at random."

On the second anniversary of the single worst massacre of Iraqi civilians committed by a private force since the US invasion, President Obama should be forced to explain to the American people and the people of Iraq and Afghanistan why he continues to pay hundreds of millions of dollars to this company and why he permits them to remain on the ground, representing the United States in these countries. At a recent hearing of the bipartisan Wartime Contracting Commission, commissioner Linda Gustitus asserted that in not canceling Blackwater's contracts after Nisour Square, the State Department "helped to send a message to other contractors that you can do a lot and not have your contract terminated."

About Jeremy Scahill

Jeremy Scahill, a Puffin Foundation Writing Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the author of the bestselling ***Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army***, published by Nation Books. He is an award-winning investigative journalist and correspondent for the national radio and TV program Democracy Now!.
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