

Blackwater mercenaries convicted for role in 2007 Iraq massacre

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A federal court jury convicted four former Blackwater Worldwide mercenaries on charges of murder and manslaughter Wednesday for their role in the 2007 massacre in Nisour Square in Baghdad, which left 17 unarmed Iraqi civilians dead and another 20 wounded.

Blackwater earned global notoriety for the massacre, which was one expression of a brutal US war and occupation that has left hundreds of thousands of Iraqis dead and laid waste to an entire society. The Nisour Square massacre stands alongside similar atrocities carried out by US forces in Haditha, Fallujah, the Abu Ghraib prison facility and elsewhere.

Former Blackwater sniper Nicholas Slatten was convicted of first degree murder. Evan Liberty, Paul Slough and Dustin Heard were all found guilty of voluntary manslaughter and using a machine gun to carry out a violent crime. The convictions carry minimum sentences of 30 years in prison for Liberty, Slough and Heard and a potential life sentence for Slatten.

The decision is subject to appeal, which could take a year or more, and the verdicts could be overturned in the process.

After 28 days of deliberation following an 11-week trial, the jury in a federal district court in Washington decisively rejected the defense team's arguments that the mercenaries had fired on the crowd in self-defense. This story had already been thoroughly debunked by an Iraqi government study and independent investigations by reporters at the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

On September 16, 2007, the security contractors opened up with machine guns and grenade launchers into stopped traffic, before turning their sights on crowds of civilians seeking to flee the scene. The

Blackwater forces suffered virtually no damage during the incident.

Civilian vehicles were riddled with dozens of bullets. One woman was shot as she held her dead son in her arms, with the vehicle she was in then incinerated. Blackwater helicopters also fired into cars from overhead.

Jurors were reportedly overwhelmed by the gruesome details supplied in testimony by witnesses. One juror was excused after informing the judge that testimony from a father about the death of his 9-year old son caused her to suffer from bouts of insomnia.

The massacre occurred amidst the massive wave of sectarian and ethnic bloodletting, fomented in 2007 by the US as part the "surge," which forced hundreds of thousands of Iraqis to flee their homes in a matter of months, bringing to the total number of refugees produced by the US invasion to some 3.7 million.

The Obama administration, which prosecuted the case, has sought to spin the guilty verdict as an example of the US government's supposed democratic values.

"This verdict is a resounding affirmation of the commitment of the American people to the rule of law, even in times of war," US Attorney Ronald Machen said in an official statement. "Today's verdict demonstrates the FBI's dedication to investigating violations of US law no matter where they occur," said top FBI official Andrew McCabe.

In reality, while the Blackwater mercenaries are guilty of horrendous crimes, these crimes flowed from the overarching crime: the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US government with the aim of extending its control over the oil-rich country.

For this crime, the entire political and military establishment stands guilty, and none of the principal architects have been prosecuted. This includes the top

officials in the Bush administration: former president George W. Bush, former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, former vice president Dick Cheney and many others. The preparation and launching of the war of aggression was aided and abetted by Democrats and Republicans in the Congress, along with the mass media, which propagated the lies used to justify the war.

While shielding Bush-era war criminals from prosecution, the Obama administration has continued and extended the global program of war and violence of the US military. The invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were followed by the war in Libya, the stoking of civil war in Syria, and a massive program of murder through drone warfare, with the populations of Yemen, Libya and Somalia subject to regular volleys of cruise missiles and laser guided-weapons.

Now the Obama administration has launched a new war in the Middle East, with troops returning to Iraq and preparations being put in place for a direct war in Syria. At the same time, the US military is increasingly turning its attention to larger threats to the interests of the American ruling class, including China and Russia.

The Blackwater verdict gives expression to growing popular revulsion against the neocolonial war policies of the government and the prominent role of fascistic mercenary forces. While the Justice Department brought the case, the verdict was undoubtedly received with a mixture of shock and apprehension by the Obama administration and the military.

Contrary to numerous reports in the corporate media portraying the convictions as a long-standing goal of US policy, in reality the military, political establishment and court system made strenuous efforts to protect the Blackwater agents from prosecution. The State Department granted the mercenaries partial immunity, and a federal judge dismissed the case against them in 2009 before it was later reinstated. The US also blocked efforts by Iraq to try the men in Baghdad.

Meanwhile, Blackwater, since renamed Xi and now Academi, remains a favored instrument of US foreign policy, with hundreds of its private gunmen serving as shock troops for the US-backed regime in Kiev in its terror war against the civilian population of east Ukraine. Supported by US intelligence, Blackwater operators have played a leadership role in the

operations of neo-Nazi Right Sector militias and fascistic forces responsible for ongoing atrocities.



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