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A shocking new report by The Guardian and BBC Arabic details how the United States armed and trained Iraqi death squads that ran torture centers. It is a story that stretches from the U.S.-backed death squads in Central America during the 1980s to the imprisoned Army whistleblower Bradley Manning. We play extended excerpts of "James Steele: America's Mystery Man in Iraq," which exposes the role the retired U.S. colonel James Steele, a veteran of American proxy wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, played in training Iraqi police commando units. "We spent maybe six months trying to track down young American soldiers who served in Samarra," says the film's executive producer, Maggie O'Kane, who notes the investigation was sparked by memos found in the Iraq War Logs released by WikiLeaks. "But many were too frightened because of what happened to Bradley Manning." A Pentagon spokesman told The Guardian it had seen the reports and is looking into the situation. "As you know, the issue surrounding accusation of abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees is a complex one that is full of history and emotion," said Col. Jack Miller. "It will take time to work a thorough response."

AMY GOODMAN: As we continue to mark the 10th anniversary of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, we turn today to a shocking new report by *The Guardian* newspaper and BBC Arabic detailing how the United States armed and trained Iraqi police commando units that ran torture centers and death squads. It's a story that stretches from the U.S.-backed involvement in Latin America to the imprisoned Army whistleblower Bradley Manning. In a moment, we'll be joined by one of the chief reporters behind the investigation, but first I want to play an excerpt of the documentary that accompanies their report.

U.S. SOLDIER: First to fight for the right and to build the nation's might, and the Army goes rolling along.

NARRATOR: This is one of the great untold stories of the Iraq War, how just over a year after the invasion, the United States funded a sectarian police commando force that set up a network of torture centers to fight the insurgency. It was a decision that helped fuel a sectarian civil war between Shia and Sunni that ripped the country apart. At its height, it was claiming 3,000 victims a month.

This is also the story of James Steele, the veteran of America's dirty war in El Salvador. He was in charge of the U.S. advisers who trained notorious Salvadoran paramilitary units to fight left-wing guerrillas. In the course of that civil war, 75,000 people died, and over a million people became refugees. Steele was chosen by the Bush administration to work with General David Petraeus to organize these paramilitary police commandos.

This is the only known Iraqi video footage of Steele, a shadowy figure, always in the background, observing, evaluating. The man on his left is his collaborator, Colonel James Coffman. He reported directly to General David Petraeus, who funded this police commando force from a multibillion-dollar fund.

The thousands of commandos that Steele let loose came to be mostly made up of Shia militias, like the Badr Brigades, hungry to take revenge on the Sunni supporters of Saddam Hussein. Steele oversaw the commandos, mostly made up of militias. They were torturing detainees for information on the insurgency.

GILLES PERESS: He hears the scream of the other guy who's being tortured, you know, as we speak. There's the blood stains on the corner of the desk in front of him.

GEN. MUNTADHER AL-SAMARI: [translated] The things that went on there: drilling, murder, torture—the ugliest sorts of torture I've ever seen.

NARRATOR: The U.S. was desperate for information on the insurgency. And Steele's expertise was turning that information obtained from thousands of detainees into actionable intelligence.

TODD GREENTREE: Colonel Steele is one of the few people who understands how to conduct intelligence-driven operations against operational cells of an insurgency or terrorist organization.

NARRATOR: The Iraqi leader of these feared commandos was Adnan Thabit. In the city of Samarra, his commandos and their American advisers turned the main library into a detention center, where torture was routine occurrence.

AMY GOODMAN: An excerpt from the *Guardian*/BBC Arabic documentary *Searching for Steele*. The investigation into the U.S.-backed commando units was sparked by memos found in the Iraq War logs leaked by Bradley Manning to WikiLeaks.

Joining us now in London from BBC headquarters is Maggie O’Kane. She’s multimedia editor and director of investigations at *The Guardian* newspaper and executive producer of the new documentary, longtime reporter who’s been named British journalist of the year and foreign correspondent of the year.

Maggie, welcome to *Democracy Now!* Talk about why you undertook this documentary, this investigation.

MAGGIE O’KANE: Well, I think when the WikiLeaks documents came out in November 2011, I had a sense, and the team that I work with who have spent a lot of time covering the war in Iraq, that there was a deeper story here. And one of the things that made us very interested was there was a reference to a thing called "Frago 242," which was Fragmentary Order 242, which was a U.S. military order instructing U.S. soldiers to ignore Iraq-on-Iraqi torture. Now, this incidence, this Frago 242, came up over a thousand times in the documents as we looked at it, and we wondered why was this order issued and what was the story behind it. And there was also references in the WikiLeaks to a General Adnan Thabit, who was visiting the American embassy. So, it was a sense that there was a deeper story to tell here and that the WikiLeaks documents, because they were the actual documents and what the State Department was sending back to Washington about what was going on, that this was a real treasure trove that we should explore, rather than just become excited about the means of these documents being delivered.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's talk about Jim Steele's time in Latin America, specifically El Salvador, and go back to a clip of *Searching for Steele*.

NARRATOR: Vietnam, the conflict in which over 58,000 U.S. soldiers died, is where James Steele was first introduced to counterinsurgency as an alternative way of combating a guerrilla uprising. Steele served in the Vietnam War in the Blackhorse Regiment from 1968 to 1969. He was described by General George Patton Jr. as the best troop commander in his regiment.

But if Vietnam shaped his formative military career, it was in the war against left-wing insurgents in El Salvador that James Steele secured his reputation as the counterinsurgency specialist. Steele arrived in El Salvador in 1984 as the leader of the U.S. MilGroup, a group of U.S. military advisers to the El Salvadoran army.

Todd Greentree got to know James Steele when he was working in the U.S. embassy in El Salvador at the time.

TODD GREENTREE: Colonel Steele, as the MilGroup commander, was in charge of all of the special forces teams, the training teams that were out at the head—the brigade headquarters.

NARRATOR: The U.S. was trying to defeat a guerrilla insurgency, and American experts trained the Salvadoran security forces in the dark arts of counterinsurgency. Some of these Salvadoran paramilitary units were effectively death squads.

Celerino Castillo was a U.S. drug enforcement agent who was involved in training these paramilitaries. He was widely acknowledged for his efforts. Castillo met James Steele in Salvador.

CELERINO CASTILLO: A very military type, very disciplined. His decorations, medals and stuff that was given to him by the U.S. military and the Salvadoran military, were surrounding his office. So, I was very impressed with Colonel Steele.

NARRATOR: Dr. George Vickers got to know and like James Steele when he visited Salvador to write a Ph.D. thesis on U.S. military strategy in Central America.

DR. GEORGE VICKERS: He was totally committed to defeating the guerrilla insurgency in El Salvador. He used to discuss how he traveled around to the military bases where U.S. trainers were based. He talked about the importance of building human intelligence information as opposed to just technical information. I don't think he had any hesitations about obtaining information by very rough forms that were being carried out by the Salvadoran armed forces under the eyes of U.S. military trainers.

NARRATOR: Steele was the chief American counterinsurgency expert on the ground in El Salvador, a figure of enormous authority to the El Salvadoran military.

CELERINO CASTILLO: He was the MilGroup commander in El Salvador. Nothing moves without his authority. And their objective was to eradicate the guerrilla movement. It's very well written, through history, that there were major massacres being conducted.

NARRATOR: We put these allegations to retired Colonel Steele and have received no reply. By the end of the civil war, at least 75,000 Salvadoran civilians had died, and one million refugees had fled the country. The Salvadoran military halted the advance of the guerrillas, leading some in Washington to believe the U.S. advisory role was a success, so much so that even David Petraeus, then an ambitious 33-year-old major, visited El Salvador to study this counterinsurgency campaign. The young Petraeus even reportedly stayed in Steele's house while there.

AMY GOODMAN: The BBC Arabic/*Guardian* investigation called *Searching for Steele*. I wanted to turn right now, in January 2005, *Newsweek* magazine reporting the Pentagon considering using what it described as the "Salvador Option" in Iraq. Shortly after the article's publication, investigative journalist [Allan Nairn](#) appeared on *Democracy Now!* His 1984 article in *The Progressive* magazine, titled "Behind the Death Squads," exposed the CIA's backing of El Salvador death squads and led to an investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

ALLAN NAIRN: In El Salvador, and not just Salvador, but about three dozen other countries, the U.S. government, in an integrated effort involving the CIA, the Pentagon and the State Department, backed the creation of military units that targeted civilian activists. In Salvador, I interviewed many of the officers involved in running these squads. For example, General "Chele" Medrano, who was on the CIA payroll, described how they picked their targets. He said they targeted people who speak—and these are his words—"against Yankee imperialism, against the oligarchy, against military men. These people are traitors to the country. What can the troops do? When they find them, they kill them."

Actually, they didn't always kill them. Often they brought them to the headquarters of the treasury police, the national guard, the army, and they tortured them for days. One former member of the Salvadoran treasury police, René Hurtado, described a course that was given at army general staff headquarters, where American officers gave instruction in techniques including electroshock torture. Hurtado himself said he conducted such torture. He said—these are his words: "You put wires on the prisoner's vital parts. You place the wires between the prisoner's teeth, on the penis, in the vagina. The prisoners feel it more if their feet are in the water, and they're seated on iron, so the blow is stronger. ... When it's over, you just throw him in the alleys with a sign saying, Mano Blanco, ESA (Secret Anticommunist Army), or Maximiliano Hernandez Brigade." These are the names of the Salvadoran death squads.

I was given a chance to see the archives of the Salvadoran national police, the intelligence archives, and you could see they had files marked "union," "student," "religious." They showed me a card file, which included surveillance reports on activists who had traveled to other countries. These surveillance reports were given to them, according to the captain who was giving me this tour, by the CIA. The whole filing system was set up for them by the U.S. Agency for International Development. ...

Something on the order of 75,000 Salvadoran civilians were killed by the Salvadoran military, most of them during the '70s. And the majority of these were targeted by these death-squad-type forces. So, one point is, these were not combatants who were being killed. These were not armed guerrillas. They were sometimes engaged by the Salvadoran military in combat, but the death squad operations, which the Pentagon, according to *Newsweek*, is now talking about using for Iraq, these went after civilians.

AMY GOODMAN: That was investigative journalist Allan Nairn. His 1984 article in *The Progressive* magazine was called "Behind the Death Squads." It exposed the CIA's backing of El Salvador death squads and led to an investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee. Maggie O'Kane, before we go to break and then move into the Iraq part of this story, flesh out more for us Colonel James Steele, the bridge between Salvador and Iraq.

MAGGIE O'KANE: Well, one of the things that just strikes me, listening to that, is the sort of extraordinary parallels that exist between Salvador and Iraq. One of the interesting things in the WikiLeaks documents is that General Adnan Thabit, who ran the special police commandos that were carrying out the torture, used the phrase "to fight terror with terror," which is exactly the same phrase that was used by General Montana *phon.* in El Salvador when they were operating what was called the "platforms," which were basically the torture and interrogation centers where the American advisers were present. And what you have seen is an almost exact parallel between the platforms in El Salvador, which were the regional torture centers, and the platforms in Iraq, which operated in the same way, which was bringing in hundreds of mostly Sunni men and boys and torturing them for information.

Now, in between the Salvador operation, we find that James Steele was involved in Iran-Contra, was one of six key people, along with Oliver North, that was funneling arms to the Ilopango air base to Nicaragua, to the Contras there. He then went on and was appointed by Dick Cheney to go to Panama to set up the police force there after the overthrow of Noriega. And between that, he goes in and out of the energy business. He's employed by Enron. He

works for various private military companies. And then he seems to be called back in at periods of crisis or at periods where they need his experience. So, in 2004, when the insurgency was gaining strength in Iraq, there is a call from Steele—to Steele directly from Donald Rumsfeld that he is to go to Iraq and to get involved in the training of the special police commandos. And this, we now understand, was to go to Iraq and set up a similar platform operation, which would involve regional torture centers, to get information on the insurgents.

AMY GOODMAN: We're speaking with Maggie O'Kane, multimedia investigations editor at *The Guardian*

. She's speaking to us from London, voted best foreign correspondent of the year, as well as British journalist of the year. When we come back, we go to the excerpt of *Searching for Steele* in Iraq. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: As we turn back to the documentary *Searching for Steele*, we turn to the city of Samarra, where the U.S.-backed Iraqi special commandos took over the city's library and turned it into an interrogation center. This is another excerpt of the film.

NARRATOR: Samarra was the first place that the connection between James Steele and the activities of the police commandos was made known to the outside world. *New York Times*

journalist Peter Maass convinced General Petraeus to allow him and photographer Gilles Peress to visit the commandos in Samarra. Their host was James Steele.

GILLES PERESS: What I heard is prisoners screaming all night long, you know, at which point you have the young U.S. captain telling his soldiers, "Don't come near this thing."

NARRATOR: Gilles Peress' stark black-and-white photographs capture how the commandos worked in Samarra. James Steele crops up in these photographs repeatedly.

PETER MAASS: I was staying at the base in Samarra, an American base, and I overheard soldiers, American soldiers at this base, talking about having watched prisoners be kind of strung up like animals after a hunt over a bar, having watched prisoners be actually tortured.

NARRATOR: Adnan Thabit and the American military made the joint decision to set up the commando headquarters and interrogation center in the city's main library. We spoke to two men from Samarra who were imprisoned in the library. Still fearful, they asked us to conceal their identities.

TORTURE SURVIVOR 1: [translated] We would be blindfolded and handcuffed behind our backs. Then they would beat us with shovels and pipes. We'd be tied to a spit, or we'd be hung from the ceiling by our hands, and our shoulders would be dislocated.

TORTURE SURVIVOR 2: [translated] They electrocuted me. They hung me from the ceiling. They were pulling at my ears with pliers, stamping on my head, asking me about my wife, saying they would bring her here.

PETER MAASS: The interrogation center was the only place in the kind of mini Green Zone in Samarra that I was not allowed to visit. However, one day, Jim Steele said to me, "Hey, they just captured a Saudi jihadi. Would you like to interview him?"

GILLES PERESS: Was Steele completely together to bring us into the library? Maybe not.

NARRATOR: Maass and Peress were about to get an unprecedented glimpse into this clandestine world.

PETER MAASS: We kind of walk into the entrance area, and the first thing that I see is one of the Iraqi guards beating up one of the Iraqi prisoners. And then I'm taken not into the main area, kind of the main hall, although out the corner of my eye I could see there were a lot of prisoners in there with their hands tied behind their backs. I was taken to a side office where the Saudi was brought in, and there was actually blood dripping down the side of a desk in this office.

GILLES PERESS: We were in a room in the library interviewing Steele, and I'm looking around. I see blood everywhere, you know.

PETER MAASS: And while this interview was going on, me and the Saudi, with Jim Steele also in the room, there were these terrible screams. There was somebody shouting, "Allah! Allah! Allah!" But it wasn't, you know, kind of religious ecstasy or something like that; these were screams of pain and terror.

NARRATOR: We asked General Adnan why he thought the prisoners were screaming.

GEN. ADNAN THABIT: [translated] Maybe sometimes when officers visit prisons, the prisoners do start shouting. They're a bit like whirling dervishes. They love to scream, "Allah! Allah!"

PETER MAASS: They were so loud, and they were so disturbing, that Steele left the room to go find out, you know, what was going on, because it was breaking up our interview. And while he was gone, the screaming stopped, and then he came back into the room, and the interview continued.

NARRATOR: Although James Steele did not respond to our request for an interview about his activities in Samarra, he did tell *The New York Times* that he opposes human rights abuses. One American soldier in Samarra was deeply affected by what he saw.

NEIL SMITH: At the time, I just felt like everybody knew and nobody cared that there was torture going on.

NARRATOR: Army medic Neil Smith remembers just how frightened Iraqi civilians in Samarra were of the special police commandos.

NEIL SMITH: What was pretty widely known in our battalion, definitely in our platoon, was that they were pretty violent with their interrogations, that they would beat people, shock them with, you know, electrical shock, stab them. I don't know what all else—you know, sounds like pretty awful things. If you sent a guy there, he was going to get tortured and perhaps raped, or whatever, humiliated and brutalized by the special commandos in order whatever information they wanted.

GEN. MUNTADHER AL-SAMARI: [translated] I remember a 14-year-old who was tied to one of the library's columns. And he was tied up with his legs above his head, tied up. His whole body was blue because of the impact of the cables with which he had been beaten.

NARRATOR: Petraeus defended his record with the police commandos to *PBS Frontline's* Martin Smith. He says he was aware of individual militia members in the commandos, but not militia groups.

GEN. DAVID PETRAEUS: I did not see militia groups in the special police during the time that I was there.

MARTIN SMITH: Did you think about what you could have done differently, might have done differently, to have prevented the development of these militias that were effectively developing under your watch?

GEN. DAVID PETRAEUS: Well, I, again, don't—I have not seen—you know, we kept hearing this all the time, Martin, that this or that. To find the absolute evidence of this has actually been quite difficult.

NARRATOR: But Jerry Burke, who was a senior adviser in police affairs to the Iraqi Interior Ministry says that Petraeus must have known that organized Shia militia were dominant in the police commandos.

JERRY BURKE: He had to have known. These things were discussed openly, whether it was at staff meetings or, you know, before or after various staff meetings in general conversation. Pretty much the whole world in Iraq knew that the police commandos were Badr Brigade. And he must have known about the death squad activities, and, again, it was common knowledge across Baghdad.

NARRATOR: Even Petraeus's own special adviser in the military chain of command, Colonel James Coffman, was, according to many witnesses, working side by side with James Steele in the detention centers where torture was taking place. Colonel Coffman declined to be interviewed by us.

About General Petraeus's relationship with James Steele, the official speaking for the general said: "Steele was one of thousands of advisers to Iraqi units working in the area of the Iraqi police." Journalist Peter Maass, who interviewed Petraeus at the time, remembers the relationship being a lot closer than the Petraeus statement would indicate.

PETER MAASS: It was very clear that they were very close to each other in terms of their command relationship and also in terms of their ideas and ideology about what needed to be done. Petraeus explicitly told me that he believed very, very strongly in the commandos, thought the commandos were successful, and wanted them to become bigger, stronger and even more prevalent in the fight against the insurgency.

NARRATOR: International humanitarian law imposes obligations on those engaged in armed conflict regarding the treatment of prisoners. Not only must prisoners not be abused, but those detaining prisoners also have an obligation to ensure respect, as well. It is not acceptable to turn a blind eye.

GEN. PETER PACE: It is absolutely the responsibility of every U.S. servicemember, if they see inhumane treatment being conducted, to intervene, to stop it.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD: But I don't think you mean they have an obligation to physically stop it; it's to report it.

GEN. PETER PACE: If they are physically present when inhumane treatment is taking place, sir, they have an obligation to try to stop it.

NARRATOR: The publication by WikiLeaks of thousands of diplomatic cables show that by July 2005 the U.S. embassy in Baghdad was telling Washington about the abuse being committed by the commandos. We also learned that Adnan Thabit was a guest at the American embassy in Baghdad. He met the U.S. ambassador for counterterrorism and talked about his approach to policing. This is an extract from what he's reported to have said.

CABLE EXTRACT: "Summary: Fight Terror with Terror. ... Major General Thabit, who created and commands the Special Police Forces, is a Sunni officer who served time in prison for attempting to overthrow the Saddam Regime. ... They expressed the view that it's necessary to fight terror with terror and that it is critical that their forces be respected and feared as this was what was required in Iraqi Society to command authority."

NARRATOR: We asked Ambassador Crumpton if he had been aware that Adnan Thabit's commandos were engaged in torturing detainees.

AMB. HENRY CRUMPTON: Well, I assure you, if I knew there was torture going on at that time with the people I was talking to, I would have raised it and discussed it. You're implying that I didn't know that, and I resent that question, the way you phrased it, frankly.

NARRATOR: But there are indications that the U.S. government knew what the commandos were doing.

CABLE EXTRACT: "...we remain troubled by the indications that at times units commanded by Thabit cross the line."

NARRATOR: Despite these concerns, Adnan Thabit remained officially in charge until the middle of 2006. He told us that the American officials he dealt with were aware of what his men were doing.

GEN. ADNAN THABIT: [translated] Until I left, the Americans knew about everything I did. They knew what was going on in the interrogations, and they knew the detainees. And even some of the intelligence about the detainees came to us from them. They are lying.

AMY GOODMAN: An excerpt from *James Steele: America's Mystery Man in Iraq*, the BBC Arabic/
Guardian investigation. We'll link to the [complete film](#) online. Our guest is the executive producer of the film, Maggie O'Kane, multimedia editor and director of investigations at *The Guardian* newspaper. We'll come back to her in a minute.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: "Peace Train," by the British singer-songwriter Yusuf Islam, formerly known as Cat Stevens. In 2004, he was denied entry into the United States after mistakenly being placed on the Department of Homeland security watchlist. This is *Democracy Now!*, [democracynow.org](#), *The War and Peace Report*. I'm Amy Goodman.

Our guest is Maggie O'Kane, multimedia investigations editor at *The Guardian*, former foreign correspondent. Her past awards include British journalist of the year and foreign correspondent of the year. She is joining us from London.

Maggie, I wanted to get your response to the Pentagon response. While the former Army Colonel Jim Steele and the former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld refused to talk to your newspaper, *The Guardian*, the Pentagon did issue a response after your report was published. Colonel Jack Miller, a Pentagon spokesman, told *The Guardian*, quote, "Obviously we have seen the reports and we are currently looking into the situation. As you know the issue surrounding accusation of abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees is a complex one that is full of history and emotion. It will take time to work a thorough response." Maggie O'Kane, your response to the Pentagon?

MAGGIE O'KANE: Well, I mean, we're still waiting. And we know, unofficially, from sources within the Pentagon, that they're—to quote one high-ranking military officer, he said to us, "The

difficulty is that those guys were wearing the same uniform that we're wearing now." So I think the Pentagon is in a very difficult position. And we await to hear what they've got to say. We have heard nothing from James Steele. We've heard nothing from Donald Rumsfeld.

We also know that CENTCOM, immediately after the film was broadcast on BBC Arabic, set up a monitoring unit within CENTCOM

to see what the response has been among the Arab population. We know also that there were public screenings of the film in Samarra, in which people came out onto a square to watch the film, which, in a sense, is a sort of acknowledgment of what happened to the male population of that time. But so far, the Pentagon has said nothing.

I mean, one of the interesting things I find is that the interest in this in Europe, for example, is huge. I mean, 14 countries have—are showing the film over the next 10 days and have bought it. But actually, within the America mainstream television networks, there's been very little response, and also very little response from the American mainstream media. So I presume they're just going to try and ignore it. And except for what your program has done, and also Real TV, it seems to have been played down.

AMY GOODMAN: So, you're saying that U.S. Central Command, they're monitoring reaction to this all over the world. And in the United States, the commercial networks, they did not option this film, this documentary, play it, especially at this time, on this 10th anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

MAGGIE O'KANE: Yeah, I mean, we have had very little response in the American mainstream media. It went out last night on ZDF in Germany, which is the German state channel. It went out on the Swedish state channel two nights ago. And it's going out in France tomorrow. So, one wonders, since this is about, you know, America's war in Iraq and the American special advisers, why is America not interested?

AMY GOODMAN: A very important question. I wanted—

MAGGIE O'KANE: Or why, indeed, does the Pentagon feel that they don't actually have to respond to these—to this investigation?

AMY GOODMAN: Let me ask you about WikiLeaks, Maggie O’Kane. You spoke about this at the beginning of the broadcast, but the significance of the information, of the documents they released, as the foundation of this report and so many others?

MAGGIE O’KANE: Well, Amy, it wouldn’t have happened if it wasn’t for the WikiLeaks document, because so many things are about deniability and distancing and not taking responsibility. And El Salvador is a classic example. You can push away with a distance, and you can put a layer of, you know, the local police forces in between your actions, and there’s always been plausible deniability. What WikiLeaks gave us was a clear indication from the U.S. State Department that they knew what was—they knew what was going on. And it was that bedrock, and also the information from Frago 242 that officially there was an order to ignore torture, that, you know, give journalists like me and other investigative journalists the basis of something to work on, something that actually can’t be denied, because it’s there in black and white. And that is an extraordinarily valuable tool for an investigative journalism. And you wouldn’t be seeing this film, we wouldn’t be looking back at El Salvador, if it hadn’t been for WikiLeaks.

AMY GOODMAN: Maggie, I wanted to turn to another clip. The U.S.-backed police commandos are also accused of evolving into a Shia death squad targeting Sunnis. I want to return to your film.

NARRATOR: One man who survived Samarra and Nisoor Square says that the police commandos lied about the fate of some of his fellow detainees.

TORTURE SURVIVOR 3: [translated] They started releasing some of the detainees. They were claiming that these detainees would return to their families. They were killing them and dumping their bodies on the streets of Baghdad.

JERRY BURKE: It became very obvious that this was criminal activity by the special commandos. They were eliminating their own opposition and terrorizing citizens from the Sunni community. We lost the support of a lot of Iraqi citizens who became very cynical and very

anti-American. Even the ones who were friendly with us couldn't understand why we were allowing this to happen.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD: Good afternoon, folks.

REPORTER: Are you concerned over—and, in fact, is the United States looking into growing reports of uniformed death squads in Iraq perhaps assassinating and torturing hundreds of Sunnis? And if that's true, what would that say about stability in Iraq?

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD: I'm not going to comment on hypothetical questions. I have not seen reports that hundreds are being killed by roving death squads at all. I'm not going to get into speculation like that.

REPORTER: Well, sir, that's not a hypothetical, I don't believe. The Sunnis themselves are charging that hundreds have been assassinated, people shot in the head, found in alleys.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE DONALD RUMSFELD: What you're talking about are unverified, to my knowledge at least, unverified comments. I just don't have any data from the field that I could comment on in a specific way.

NARRATOR: But Donald Rumsfeld should have known about the death squad activities. James Steele had written to Rumsfeld six weeks earlier warning him that the police commandos, armed and financed by the U.S., were effectively a Shia militia engaged in death squad activities.

MEMO TO DON RUMSFELD: "MEMO TO DON RUMSFELD

"FROM JIM STEELE

"...thugs like the commander of the Wolf Brigade who has been involved in death squad activities, extortion of detainees and a general pattern of corruption. ... Nearly all of the new recruits within the commandos are Shia. Many of them are Badr members."

AMY GOODMAN: Maggie O’Kane, talk more about what you have found here.

MAGGIE O’KANE: Well, I think what’s very important to understand here is that there was a creation of the special police commandos, which began in 2004, and over the period of the next year, they developed into a force that was nearly 12,000 strong, which had been armed by the Americans, had been—was being advised by them, and included this network of torture platforms. Then you had another step, which was, in June 2005, you had a highly sectarian Shia minister taking over in the Ministry of the Interior. And basically this force now was handed over also to his control, and it began a full-scale war on the Sunni community, which involved large-scale death squad activity.

Now, before this was—this was building up, Steele left in September 2004. Some of the other advisers stayed. And then, despite the warnings of many within the Iraqi political establishment, who said, "Do not hand this force over to the control of Jabr," it was allowed to happen. So, again, this brought the killing onto a new scale. Our information is that while Steele was organizing the platform of torture centers, there was not wide-scale death squad activity. That took place after 2005, when, effectively, the special police commandos were handed over to Jabr Solagh. And then hell broke out in Iraq. Through 2005 and 2006, there was a civil war, a sectarian civil war, in which as many as 3,000 bodies a month were turning up in the streets of Iraq. That’s what—and that was precipitated and certainly aided by the formation of the special police commandos.

AMY GOODMAN: A central figure in your investigation is a former Iraqi general who spoke out for the first time in your film about Army Colonel Jim Steele and the U.S.-backed torture

program.

NARRATOR: General Muntadher al-Samari is a former general in the Iraqi army. After the invasion, he worked with the Americans to rebuild the police force. But Muntadher was very disturbed by the abuse and torture he witnessed being committed by the police commandos. He tried, on a number of occasions, to stop it. He has never spoken before about the part the U.S. played in running the special police commandos.

GEN. MUNTADHER AL-SAMARI: [translated] The Ministry of Interior had 14 to 15 prisons. They were secret, never declared. But the American top brass and the Iraqi leadership knew all about these prisons, the things that went on there—drilling, murder, torture—the ugliest sorts of torture I've ever seen.

NARRATOR: General Muntadher alleges that James Steele had access to all of these prisons and that he visited one in Baghdad with him.

GEN. MUNTADHER AL-SAMARI: [translated] Yes, that's James Steele. That's what he always used to wear: jeans and a leather jacket. I remember he always wore his gun here, on the right-hand side.

AMY GOODMAN: An excerpt of the documentary *Searching for Steele*. Maggie O'Kane, multimedia investigations editor at *The Guardian*, talk more about the significance of what he said and also Steele's relationship with Petraeus, Maggie.

MAGGIE O'KANE: Well, in terms of the relationship with Petraeus, the main link between Colonel Steele and General Petraeus was Colonel James Coffman, who was the direct link in the chain of command between Petraeus and special police commandos. Colonel Coffman was appointed as the special adviser to the special—to the police commandos, reporting directly to

General Petraeus. He described himself in the *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper, when he was interviewed, as General Petraeus's eyes and ears on the ground in Iraq.

So, from our interviews with people who worked within the special police commandos who observed Steele and Coffman, one said to me, "Steele and Coffman were never apart. In the 40 or 50 times I saw them inside the detention centers, I never saw them separated. They came in separate cars every morning and left separately, but worked hand in hand." So there was clearly a close working relationship between Steele and Coffman, who was reporting to General Petraeus.

But we understand that Steele was sent to Iraq by Donald Rumsfeld, and we understand that because Donald Rumsfeld actually writes to George Bush in September 2004 and tells him about sending James Steele to Iraq.

AMY GOODMAN: What most surprised you by this investigation, Maggie, by what you found?

MAGGIE O'KANE: I think the most surprising thing was the scale and the organization of the—of the torture, that it was sort of so well organized, that there were these platforms, that there were hundreds of people being lifted all of the time.

And the other thing that surprised me about it is that somehow in the kind of fog of war, that we never, as journalists, never really seem to reach the—to report it in a way that people could really understand what was happening there. There were reports. It was called "The Way of the Commandos." There were reports that torture was going on, but somehow it never penetrated, or it was never sort of acknowledged that that's the way the war was being conducted.

And I think one of the things, the great things, that I have learned from this is that we're very—we're very easy with words like "human intelligence," "counterinsurgency," and that we don't really understand that this is about systematic and brutal torture that has repercussions among the civilian population.

And also that there was one man whose history goes back through so many of America's wars. And I think it's indicative of a very dysfunctional, brutal time, that I hope this film will be a legacy that actually says, if you want to go to war, this is what war means. It means 14-year-old boys being hung up and tortured. It means men being turned on spits. And that's called "counterinsurgency." So I just feel it's important that this information comes out, and I'm shocked, in a way, that we want to forget it.

AMY GOODMAN: And as we wrap up, I wanted to turn to Bradley Manning, the U.S. Army private who has admitted to leaking hundreds of thousands of classified documents to the whistleblowing website WikiLeaks. I want to ask about the chilling effect his case has had among soldiers who may otherwise speak out against abuses. Let's go to just an excerpt of a leaked audio recording of Bradley Manning, first time we hear him speaking in his own words in custody. This is from his hearing last month. Listen very carefully.

BRADLEY MANNING: I believed that if the general public, especially the American public, had access to the information contained within the CIDNE-I and CIDNE-A tables, this could spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy in general, as well as it related to Iraq and Afghanistan.

AMY GOODMAN: Bradley Manning says he released these documents to open up a debate. Very interesting, as he remains behind bars facing decades in prison. Maggie O'Kane, you were talking about the information that was released, on which you built your report, having so much difficulty getting into the United States corporate media, though you're getting it everywhere else all over the world.

MAGGIE O'KANE: Yes, indeed. There hasn't been the response we expected in America. But I do want to go back to the point which I made before. Really, this would not be coming out, if it hadn't been for Bradley Manning. This information, the basic information, has been very key.

And I'll tell you something else that's very, very chilling. We spent maybe six months trying to track down young American soldiers who served in Samarra. Many of them knew what was going on there. In the end, we found one guy, called Neil Smith, in Detroit, who was 21 when he was there, who spoke out.

AMY GOODMAN: We have five seconds.

MAGGIE O'KANE: He spoke out because, he said, "I'm a born-again—I'm born-again Christian." But many were too frightened because of what happened to Bradley Manning.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, I want to thank you so much for the documentary and your time, Maggie O'Kane, multimedia investigations editor at *The Guardian*, executive producer of the new documentary, *James Steele: America's Mystery Man in Iraq*, a BBC Arabic/*Guardian* investigation. We'll link to the [complete film](#) at democracynow.org.

You can also go online to see our [interactive timeline](#) featuring highlights of *Democracy Now!*'s decade of coverage of the Iraq War.