

From Democracy Now | Original Article

President Trump's pardon of four former Blackwater contractors convicted for their role in a massacre in Baghdad has sparked outrage in Iraq. The Blackwater guards include Nicholas Slatten, who was sentenced to life in prison after being convicted of first-degree murder for his role in the 2007 Nisoor Square massacre, when he and other Blackwater mercenaries opened fire with machine guns and grenades on a crowded public space in Baghdad, killing 17 unarmed civilians, including women and children. The youngest victim was a 9-year-old named Ali Kinani. We re-broadcast clips from a short documentary, "Blackwater's Youngest Victim," by The Intercept's Jeremy Scahill and filmmaker Rick Rowley, that first aired on Democracy Now! in 2010.

This is a rush transcript. Copy may not be in its final form.

AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!*, democracynow.org, *The Quarantine Report*. I'm Amy Goodman.

President Trump's pardon of four former Blackwater mercenaries convicted for their role in a massacre in Baghdad has sparked outrage in Iraq. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry said the decision violates, quote, "the values of justice, human rights and rule of law" and, quote, "ignores the dignity of the victims," unquote. The Blackwater guards included Nicholas Slatten, who was sentenced to life in prison after being convicted of first-degree murder for his role in the 2007 Nisoor Square massacre, when he and other Blackwater mercenaries opened fire with machine guns and grenades on a crowded public space in Baghdad, killing 17 unarmed civilians, including women and children, the youngest victim a 9-year-old boy named Ali Kinani.

Later in the program, we'll be joined by a lawyer who sued Blackwater over the massacre, but first we turn to a short documentay by Jeremy Scahill and Rick Rowley that first [aired](#) on *Democracy Now!*

in 2010. It features an interview with Ali Kinani's father, Mohammed Kinani. This is *Blackwater's Youngest Victim*

.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] I'm not just remembering the scene. I'm reliving it as if it were happening now. I will never forget those few minutes. So whatever you ask me, I will answer with absolute clarity.

All I could hear from my car were gunshots and the sound of glass shattering and the sound of tires blown out with bullets. I started to scream, "They killed my son! They killed my son!" What can I tell you? It was like the end of days. With cold blood and stone hearts, they continued shooting.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Baghdad, September 16, 2007. Shortly before noon, a convoy of four armored vehicles departs the Green Zone, the heavily fortified U.S. base in Iraq. The men inside of the vehicles were elite private soldiers working for Blackwater. Their code name: Raven 23.

The men had defied orders from their superiors to remain in the Green Zone and proceeded on to the streets of Baghdad. As they departed, they were again told to return to base. They didn't.

Within minutes, Blackwater Raven 23 would arrive at the congested Baghdad intersection known as Nisoor Square. Fifteen minutes later, at least 17 Iraqi civilians would be dead, more than 20 others wounded, in a shooting that would go down in infamy as Baghdad's Bloody Sunday.

You probably have never heard his name, but you likely know something about how 9-year-old Ali Mohammed Hafedh Kinani died. He was the youngest person killed by Blackwater forces at Nisoor Square.

This is the story of the death of young Ali Kinani, and his father has provided us with the most detailed eyewitness account of the Nisoor Square massacre ever given to a U.S. media outlet.

Mohammed Hafeedh Abdulrazzaq Kinani and his wife Fatimah lived with their three children in Baghdad. Mohammed ran his family’s auto parts business, and he adored his youngest son Ali, whom the family affectionately called by his kid nickname, Allawi.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] He would sleep on my arm. He was nine-and-a-half years old, but still slept on my arm. He had his own room, but he never slept alone.

When he turned 9, I told him it was time to stop using my arm as his pillow. I said, “Son, you’re getting older. Go sleep with your brothers, on your bed in your room. Your name is Ali. We used to call you Allawi, but you’ll be a man soon.” So he said, “As you wish, father.” He always said that.

So I looked and saw his feet under the door. I called him in. He opened the door and said, “Dad, I’m Allawi, not Ali.” He was telling me that he was still a child. After that, he kept sleeping on my arm. It was the only pillow he ever had.

JEREMY SCAHILL: When U.S. forces rolled into Baghdad in April of 2003, Mohammed proudly took his son to greet the men he called their liberators, the U.S. military. Mohammed was that rare personification of the neoconservative narrative about the U.S. invasion.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] The first day the American Army entered Baghdad, I handed out juice and candy in the street, to celebrate our liberation from Saddam.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Before September 16th, 2007, Mohammed had never heard of Blackwater. Now he thinks of them and that day every waking moment. He remembers that Ali was not supposed to be in his car that day. Mohammed had just pulled away from his family's home on his way to pick up his sister Jenan and her children for a visit. Ali came running out of the house.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] He was quiet the whole ride. But then we passed a newly built park, a garden. So he turned to me and asked, "Daddy, when are you going to bring us here?" I told him, "Next week, hopefully, if God wills it."

JEREMY SCAHILL: Mohammed and Ali picked up Jenan and her three children and made their way back home. The return journey would bring them through Nisoor Square. When Mohammed found himself in a traffic jam at the square that day, he thought it was a U.S. military checkpoint. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to him when he saw the armored vehicles block off traffic.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] One of the guards gestured toward us with his hands. This gesture means "stop." So we stopped. I and all the cars in front and behind me stopped. We followed their orders.

At that point, I didn't even know they were Blackwater. I didn't know it was a security company. I thought it was some sort of American Army unit, or maybe a military police unit. In any case, we followed their orders.

JEREMY SCAHILL: As Mohammed and his family waited in the SUV, the man in the car next to them was frantic. "I think someone was shot in the car in front of you," he told Mohammed. It was then Mohammed watched in horror as Blackwater gunners, for no apparent reason, blew up a white Kia sedan in front of his eyes. Inside, Mohammed would later learn, were a young Iraqi medical student and his mother.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] There was absolutely no shooting or any sign of danger for us or Blackwater. No one was in the slightest danger.

Suddenly, in the flash of a second, they started shooting in all directions. And it wasn’t warning shots. They were shooting as if they were fighting in the field.

By the time they stopped shooting, the car looked like a sieve. This is the only way to describe it, because it was truly riddled with bullets. They finished with the first car and turned their guns on us. It turned into the apocalypse.

JEREMY SCAHILL: As chaos and blood flooded the square, Mohammed remembers the fate of one man in particular who tried to flee the Blackwater gunmen.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] Everyone was trying to escape. Whoever wasn’t shot dead in their car just wanted to escape somehow. When one man tried to run, they shot him. He dropped dead on the spot. He was on the ground bleeding, and they were shooting nonstop. They shot like they were trying to kill everyone they could see. He sank into his own blood. And every minute, they would go back and shoot him again, and I could see his body shake with every bullet. He was dead, but his body shook with the bullets. He would shoot at someone else and then go back to shooting at this dead man.

The man is dead in a pool of blood. Why would you keep shooting him?

JEREMY SCAHILL: As Mohammed sat in his SUV with his 9-year-old son Ali, his sister Jenan and her three children, he realized that, for them, attempting to escape was not an option. As the shooting intensified, Mohammed yelled for the kids to get down. He and Jenan did the

same.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] Bullets were coming from the right and the left. My younger sister was trying to cover me with her body. So I pulled out of her grip and covered her with my body to protect her. I have pictures that show the headrest of my sister's seat is full of bullet holes. It was horrific, extremely terrifying. I still wake up from sleep, startled.

Why? I ask. Why would they do this? We were civilians sitting in our cars. Most of the cars had families in them. So why did this happen?

I kept hearing boom, boom, boom in my car. Bullets were flying everywhere. It was horrific, horrific. I don't know. I don't know how to describe it.

After they had killed everyone in sight, my sister and I kept still. I had her rest her head on my lap, and my body was on top of her. We would sneak to peek from under the dashboard. They continued shooting here and there, killing this and that one. Then it cleared. Nothing was moving on the street. Only the Blackwater men were moving. Then, they drove off.

JEREMY SCAHILL: It seemed to Mohammed like a miracle had blessed his car. "We're alive," he thought. As the Blackwater forces retreated, Mohammed told Jenan he was going to check on the man who had been repeatedly shot by Blackwater. It was then Mohammed's world crumbled.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] When I got out of the car, my nephew said, "Uncle, Allawi is dead." My sister started screaming, and I turned to look at Ali.

I turned and saw that his window was broken. It was shot. I looked at him, and his head was resting at the side of the door. I opened the door to see if he was OK. I opened the door, and he started falling out. I stood there in shock, watching him as the door opened and his brain fell to the ground between my feet. I looked at his brain on the ground, and I pushed him back into the car. I told my sister that they had blown his brains out.

I started to scream, “They killed my son! They killed my son!” I was turning and screaming. People were standing on the roof of a nearby building, saying, “Get out! Get out!” But I was in another world. They killed my son, and I was looking at his brain.

I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to do. I reached through the window to check his heart, and it was beating. I told my sister, who said, “Let’s rush him to the hospital. Maybe he still can make it.” But I knew. His brain was on the ground. He’s gone.

I turned the car, which had no water, no tires, and I spun it around. I drove towards Yarmouk Hospital.

JEREMY SCAHILL: At the hospital, Mohammed was told that because of Ali’s severe head injuries, an ambulance would need to rush him across town to a neurological hospital.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] Riding in the ambulance, I was completely destroyed. My son was dying in front of my eyes. He was suffering. His arms were shaking and almost pulled out the IVs. So I held his hands still.

He died. What can I say? My son. Up to the night before his death, my son never slept alone.

JEREMY SCAHILL: After Ali died, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad contacted Mohammed, offering his family a \$10,000 condolence payment, making clear it was not a remedy for what happened and not a substitute for any potential legal action against the shooters. Initially, Mohammed refused the money, but the embassy pursued his family, urging them to take it. They eventually did, but with one condition: that half the money be donated to the family of a U.S. soldier killed in Iraq. Mohammed's wife Fatimah delivered the gift to the U.S. Embassy.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] This is a gift from Ali's family to whichever family you choose, the family of any soldier who lost his life for the sake of Iraq. I want you to give it as a gift. I know it is insignificant, but it is an emotional and moral gesture from us to them.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Mohammed carries around a letter sent his family by General Ray Odierno, the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. "Your substantial generosity on behalf of the families of fallen American soldiers," Odierno wrote, "has touched me deeply."

While Mohammed and his family mourned the death of Ali, half a world away in Washington, D.C., Blackwater's owner, Erik Prince, was summoned before the U.S. Congress. Blackwater, Prince said, had been the victim of an armed ambush by Iraqi insurgents at Nisoor Square, and he defended the conduct of his men, saying they had, quote, "acted appropriately at all times."

REP. DANNY DAVIS: You do admit that Blackwater personnel have shot and killed innocent civilians, don't you?

ERIK PRINCE: No, sir. I disagree with that. I think there's been times when guys are using defensive force to protect themselves, to protect the package. They're trying to get away from danger. There could be ricochets. There are traffic accidents, yes. This is war. You know.

JEREMY SCAHILL: Mohammed watched those hearings live and was outraged.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] I wish they would ask the head of Blackwater: Did he think that this child was a threat to his company? This giant company with all the biggest weapons, guns and planes — was this boy a threat to them?

JEREMY SCAHILL: At the hearing, a State Department document was produced revealing that before Nisoor Square, the department had coordinated with Blackwater to set a low payout for Iraqi shooting victims, because, in the words of a department security official, if it was too high, Iraqis may try “to get killed by our guys to financially guarantee their family’s future.”

Despite Prince’s brazen denials, the thought of suing Blackwater didn’t cross Mohammed’s mind. He didn’t want anyone’s money. He readily cooperated with the U.S. military and federal investigators, and he believed that justice would be done in America.

Then, he says, Blackwater stepped in.

In February of 2008, ABC News did a brief story about Mohammed. The day the story was posted online, Blackwater’s attorney threatened to take legal action against the network, accusing ABC of defamation.

What outraged Mohammed was that Blackwater denied its forces killed Ali, claiming instead that he was killed by a stray bullet, possibly fired by the U.S. military an hour after Blackwater personnel had departed the scene. Blackwater claimed Ali was hit by a warning shot that ricocheted and killed him. It was not even possible, the Blackwater lawyer claimed, that Blackwater was responsible.

Shortly after that, Mohammed said an Iraqi attorney approached him. But he wasn’t just any lawyer. Ja’afar al Moussawy was the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Iraqi Criminal Tribunal, which prosecuted Saddam Hussein. He was *the* Iraqi lawyer. Mohammed agreed to meet with Moussawy and Blackwater’s regional manager. He says they offered him \$20,000.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] I said, “I’m not taking a penny from you. I want nothing.” I asked them if they wanted to resolve the problem. They said, “Yes.” I said, “OK, get me a pen and paper.” I said, “Look, I have the paper, and I can sign and waive all my rights. All of them. I will sign now, but under one condition: I want the head of Blackwater to apologize publicly to me in America and say, ‘We killed your son, and we’re sorry.’ That’s all I want.” I told them, “I don’t want \$50 or \$20,000. I just want him to publicly apologize. That would be enough for me.”

Blackwater’s regional manager said, “We do not apologize.” I said, “You kill my son and go on TV and publicly accuse me and all Iraqis of being mercenaries who intentionally have you kill us for the compensation. And you were under oath in front of Congress, and you tell me you will not apologize. What did you want, then? Why did you bring me here?” He said, “No, we won’t apologize.”

JEREMY SCAHILL: Mohammed then confronted the Blackwater manager about the company’s claim that the U.S. military, not Blackwater, may have killed Ali.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] I told the manager, “My son was killed in the car with me. How can you say it was the military? Do you want to stain the reputation the American Army? The American Army is innocent of this. Why would you blame this on them? Do you want us to hate them more? Aren’t you an American company, and this is your national military? Why would you do this to your own?” I told them, “We love the American Army more than you do.”

JEREMY SCAHILL: Mohammed threw the pen and paper at the Blackwater manager and left the meeting.

MOHAMMED KINANI: [translated] So I had no choice but to go the legal route and take things to court.

JEREMY SCAHILL: As we wrap up our time together, Mohammed Kinani shows us a cellphone video of young Ali hopping around a swimming pool with his cousins and siblings. With a smile ear to ear, Ali approaches Mohammed’s cellphone camera and says to his dad, “I am Allawi.”

ALI KINANI: [translated] I am Allawi. I am Allawi.

AMY GOODMAN: That’s *Blackwater’s Youngest Victim*, a short documentary by Jeremy Scahill and Rick Rowley that first [aired](#) on *Democracy Now!* in 2010.