

# US occupation force in Iraq recruiting former Iraqi secret police

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Faced with extensive terrorist and sabotage campaigns as well as growing popular anger over US military occupation and catastrophic social conditions, US officials in Iraq are reconstituting elements of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's secret police, the Mukhabarat, and integrating them into the US occupation authority.

On August 24, the *Washington Post* published an article by Anthony Shadid and Daniel Williams quoting extensively from interviews with unnamed Iraqi and US officials concerning US recruitment amongst Mukhabarat operatives. It wrote: "Officials are reluctant to disclose how many former agents have been recruited since the effort began. But Iraqi officials say they number anywhere from dozens to a few hundred, and US officials acknowledge that the recruitment is extensive."

The *Post* added that the Mukhabarat "is not the only target for the US [recruitment] effort," quoting another unnamed official as saying, "We're reaching out very widely."

The Mukhabarat was charged with surveillance of state agencies (army, secret police, government bureaucracy) and non-governmental organisations (religious, women's, and labor movements) in Iraq, as well as foreign spying, notably on Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US. It evolved in 1973 from the Jihaz al Khas secret police, headed by Saddam Hussein between 1964 and 1966. During the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, it analyzed intelligence on Iran provided by the CIA.

During the 1980s and 1990s, it carried out a number of massacres and assassinations of Iraqis opposed to the Hussein regime, both in Iraq and abroad. It coordinated the suppression of anti-Hussein uprisings in the Shiite south and Kurdish north of Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the 1990-1991 Gulf war. It received Washington's tacit support for these massacres, reflected in the decision by US forces to temporarily suspend enforcement of the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. According to the think-tank *Global Security*, "As a direct result of the Gulf War, the external department was reduced to less than half of its pre-1990 size, while the internal department was enlarged to

deal with increasing anti-regime activities in Iraq."

US officials interviewed by the *Post* recognised that the Mukhabarat was "loathed by most Iraqis and renowned across the Arab world for its casual use of torture, fear, intimidation, rape, and torture."

US moves to reconstitute the Mukhabarat, announced in the aftermath of the bombing of UN headquarters in Iraq, reflect concerns that US occupation forces have insufficient manpower and experience in Iraq to maintain order there. According to the *Post*, Iraqis on the Governing Council found that "US officials lack the means to recruit effective [spy] networks and are overwhelmed with information of dubious quality."

An unnamed "senior US official" told the *Post* that it might require "500,000 US troops, perhaps far more, to secure every potential target in the country"—roughly quadruple the current deployment of 132,000 troops and more than the total number of regular US Army soldiers, which stands at 480,000. The official concluded: "The key is to stay ahead of this game." US officials say they intend to use the Mukhabarat's knowledge and experience to "stay ahead of the game."

This is only one of several reported attempts by US occupation forces to preserve, rebuild, or use the Mukhabarat. On March 25, 2003, at the height of fighting in south-central Iraq during the US invasion, the *Washington Times* reported that US officials were trying to contact Mukhabarat headquarters in Baghdad to arrange for the preservation of the Mukhabarat's extensive files.

After Baghdad fell to US forces, journalists with the conservative British *Daily Telegraph*, working closely with US and British officials, used suspicious documents they claimed to have "found" in Mukhabarat headquarters to smear opponents of the Iraq war—the Russian, German, and French intelligence services, as well as a British Labour MP opposed to the war, George Galloway. They were accused of either having collaborated with or received payoffs from Hussein.

On July 21, the *New York Times* reported that the US was

attempting to resurrect the parts of the Mukhabarat that monitored Iran, Turkey and Syria. It said that the Iraqi National Congress, the party of convicted bank embezzler and Pentagon protégé Ahmed Chalabi, had held talks with former Mukhabarat officials and representatives of US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld “over the last several weeks.”

Given the cloak of secrecy that hangs over US attempts to resurrect the Iraqi secret police, it is difficult to state precisely what role these forces would play in the US occupation. However, the explanation that the mainstream US media has tried to imply—that it is simply a matter of using Iraqi intelligence to watch and identify potential terrorist activity in the region, in particular foreign terrorists entering Iraq—is certainly the least plausible.

For example, the *Washington Post* commented: “The Mukhabarat, whose name itself inspired fear in ordinary Iraqis, was the foreign intelligence service... Within that service, officials have reached out to agents who once were assigned to Syria and Iran, Iraqi officials and former intelligence agents say. For years, US relations with both Syria and Iran have remained tense... L. Paul Bremer, the US civilian administrator of Iraq, has openly accused Syria of allowing foreign fighters to enter Iraq.”

The issue goes beyond the blatant misrepresentation of Hussein’s internal security apparatus as a “foreign intelligence service.” The title of the *Post*’s article—“US recruiting Hussein’s Spies; Occupation forces hope covert campaign will help identify resistance”—provides a more honest insight into Washington’s intentions. US occupation officials are trying to use the Mukhabarat’s knowledge and experience to help focus their repression of anti-US activity in Iraq.

The timing of the announcement of the Mukhabarat’s revival, shortly after a massive bomb attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad on August 19, further suggests that a new Iraqi secret service would watch and target inhabitants of Iraq. The attack, which has persuaded many international organisations—charities, the Red Cross, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—to scale back their Iraq operations, appears to have been at least in part the work of former Iraqi army personnel.

The *Los Angeles Times* wrote on August 21: “The bomb that devastated the United Nations complex in Baghdad was a potent blend of Soviet-era artillery shells, mortar rounds, and grenades packed around a powerful centerpiece—a 500-pound bomb meant to be dropped from an aircraft, the FBI said Wednesday... The use of weaponry once part of the largely Soviet-equipped Iraqi arsenal strongly suggests a connection to Hussein loyalists.”

The attack also came on the heels of an August 14 warning

in the French news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* by the number-two UN official in Iraq, Ghassan Salameh: “Many influential Iraqis who at first felt liberated from a hated regime assured me that they were going to take up arms if coalition troops do not get results.”

Irrespective of who in fact carried out the bombings, concern is mounting within US ruling circles over the morale of former Iraqi soldiers. An August 24 *Los Angeles Times* article implicitly criticised the US occupation authority for disbanding the Iraqi army, writing that this decision “may even have provided recruits for the insurgency by alienating trained officers and enlisted men.” In this context, one cannot simply ascribe the US decision to revive the Mukhabarat—the section of the Iraqi intelligence apparatus originally charged with surveillance of the armed forces and the repression of political dissent—to the desire to monitor terrorists flowing into Iraq.

However, to the extent that the rebuilt Iraqi secret police is to be used to pursue Islamist resistance groups, this exposes the lie that served to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq, according to which Saddam Hussein was an ally of these very forces and was preparing to hand them “weapons of mass destruction.” In fact, having provided the perfect target for such movements—a US occupation force in Iraq—the US government is now turning to a force that previously proved itself capable of watching and repressing these groups: Saddam Hussein’s secret police.

This decision also explodes another lie to which US ruling circles retreated after having failed to find any substance to their allegations on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction or links to terrorism: that US forces were “liberating” Iraqis from a brutal dictatorship and bringing democracy to Iraq. Faced with daily demonstrations and attacks on coalition personnel, as well as a wave of hostility throughout the Middle East, the US government is ruling Iraq through a repressive neocolonial military occupation that will now be assisted by the former regime’s secret police.



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