

US, Israel prepare mass killings in Iraq

Bill Vann
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The Bush administration is about to launch a campaign of wholesale killings in Iraq with the assistance of the Israeli military, according to both US and Israeli sources quoted in several recent news reports.

Frustrated over the growing popular resistance to the US military occupation and determined to reduce US casualties in Iraq before next November's election, the administration has authorized a policy that could well resemble the infamous "Operation Phoenix" assassination program run by the CIA during the Vietnam War. That operation claimed the lives of as many as 41,000 Vietnamese over a four-year period beginning in 1968.

In preparation for the new counterinsurgency campaign, the US military has brought urban warfare specialists from the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the headquarters of the US Special Forces. They are training assassination teams in methods that the IDF has used to suppress Palestinian resistance to the Israel occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"This is basically an assassination program.... This is a hunter-killer team," a former senior intelligence official told the British *Guardian* newspaper. He warned that Washington's reliance on Israeli assistance in launching the operation would only intensify anger over the US occupation throughout the Middle East.

"It is bonkers, insane," the former official said. "Here we are—we're already being compared to Sharon in the Arab world, and we've just confirmed it by bringing in the Israelis and setting up assassination teams."

The *Guardian* also cited intelligence sources in Washington as reporting that Israeli military "consultants" have been sent to Iraq to advise US forces there on counterinsurgency operations.

According to the British newspaper, the new operation also includes the deployment of killer squads inside Syria to hunt down suspected resistance fighters from other Arab countries before they cross the border into Iraq.

Meanwhile, an article by Seymour Hersh, the veteran US investigative reporter, appeared in this week's *New Yorker* magazine also warning of a "major escalation of

the Special Forces covert war in Iraq" and providing additional confirmation of Israel's role in training those who will carry out the assassination program.

According to Hersh, a new Special Forces group—Task Force 121—has been formed, drawing upon Army Delta Force troops, Navy SEALs and CIA paramilitaries. "Its highest priority is the neutralization of the Baathist insurgents, by capture or assassination," he reports.

Hersh continues: "According to American and Israeli military and intelligence officials, Israeli commandos and intelligence units have been working closely with their American counterparts at the Special Forces training base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and in Israel to help them prepare for operations in Iraq. Israeli commandos are expected to serve as ad-hoc advisers—again, in secret—when full-field operations begin."

US and Israeli officials have refused to comment on the record about this collaboration on the Iraqi counterinsurgency campaign. "No one wants to talk about this; it's incendiary," an Israeli official told Hersh. "Both governments have decided at the highest level that it is in their interest to keep a low profile on US-Israeli cooperation" on the assassination program.

The new revelations concerning the Israeli role in preparing US troops to drown the Iraqi resistance in blood follow reports from Iraq indicating that the US military has already introduced tactics pioneered by the IDF in the occupied Palestinian territories.

In recent weeks there have been repeated incidents in which US forces have demolished homes believed to belong to members of the Iraqi resistance. In addition, relatives of suspected resistance leaders have been taken hostage, and, in at least one instance, an entire village has been surrounded by razor wire, with its residents forced to enter and leave through a checkpoint manned by US soldiers.

All of these are tactics that have been employed by the Israeli occupation forces during their crackdowns in the West Bank and Gaza.

A substantiation of the Israeli role in supplying tactics

for the US counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq came last July in a letter to *Army* magazine from a senior Pentagon planning officer.

Brig. Gen. Michael Vane, US Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Doctrine, Concepts and Strategies, confirmed that US military officers had been sent to Israel to consult on urban combat and intelligence methods with the IDF.

The general wrote: “Although there is much work to be done, it is inaccurate to characterize our thinking and doctrine on urban warfare as anachronistic. Experience continues to teach us many lessons, and we continue to evaluate and incorporate them appropriately into our concepts, doctrine and training.”

Vane continued: “For example, we recently traveled to Israel to glean lessons learned from their counterterrorist operations in urban areas.”

The US-Israeli cooperation on Iraq is not new. Before the invasion last March, US forces were sent to Israel to train for urban warfare at an IDF mockup of a Palestinian town in the Negev desert. US officers also reportedly reviewed Israeli tactics in the brutal assault on the Palestinian refugee camp in Jenin the previous year.

There is an unmistakable irony in Washington’s turn to the Israeli “experts” on repression. Within the last month, four former heads of Shin Bet, Israel’s internal security agency that directs so-called anti-terrorist operations, as well as the current chief of staff of the Israeli military have all warned that the iron-fisted repression employed in the occupied territories by the right-wing Zionist regime of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is preparing a social and military catastrophe.

So-called “targeted assassinations” that almost invariably claim the lives of large numbers of bystanders and collective punishment—including the mass destruction of homes and the use of roadblocks and curfews—have only increased the Palestinians’ hatred of the occupation and led to mass support for acts of resistance.

There is no reason to believe that the deployment of Israeli-trained US military death squads in Iraq combined with the other illegal means of repression already in use by the occupation authorities will not generate a similar increase in support for the resistance among broad layers of the Iraqi population. Far from extricating American troops from the quagmire created by Bush’s policy, the resort to these murderous tactics will only deepen the conflict in Iraq.

Many of the leading figures in the Bush administration, who planned the Iraq war and continue to direct the occupation, have the closest political connections to the

right-wing Likud government in Israel and are politically blind to the bankruptcy of Sharon’s strategy of repression.

Meanwhile, playing the central role in organizing the new counterinsurgency campaign is Lt. Gen. William “Jerry” Boykin. The general, a Special Forces veteran, became embroiled in controversy earlier this year for publicly portraying the war in Iraq as a struggle between Christianity and Islam. He also proclaimed that he answered only to God for his actions as a commander of a “Christian army.” In remarks to Christian evangelical audiences, Boykin expressed the view that God had placed Bush in the White House, despite the fact that “the majority of the American people did not vote for him.”

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld brushed aside the widespread demands for Boykin’s dismissal when reports of the inflammatory remarks were published in October. It is now clear that Rumsfeld insisted that the general remain at his post because of his key involvement in planning the escalation of repression in Iraq.

Hersh points out an additional motive behind the turn to greater reliance on Special Forces troops in Iraq. Under the Pentagon’s rules of engagement, the operations of Special Forces units remain secret, including their deployment overseas. Therefore, the addition of such troops to the US occupation force in Iraq will not be publicly disclosed. Under conditions in which, for political reasons, the administration has vowed to reduce the number of US troops deployed in Iraq, it can covertly add substantial forces, while hiding the buildup from the American people.

The Special Forces have undergone an immense expansion under the Bush administration. Hersh notes that the Pentagon’s budget provides \$6.5 billion for their operations and that the total number of such troops, both active and reserve, has risen to 47,000.



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