

Pro-US Iraqi factions enlisted for counterinsurgency operations

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The December 3 *Washington Post* reported that the Bush administration has sanctioned the recruitment of a special 700- to 1,000-strong “counterterrorism battalion” from the ranks of the militias maintained by pro-US political parties in the puppet Iraqi Governing Council. The decision raises disturbing questions about the methods the US intends to employ against the growing resistance to its illegal occupation of Iraq.

According to the *Post*, the militias of five political parties—the Iraqi National Congress, the Iraqi National Accord, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Iranian-backed Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—will each provide 120 to 200 recruits. The command of the unit will rest with the Governing Council’s Interior Ministry—not the new Iraqi police or military. According to one party spokesman, the establishment of the unit was “a done deal”.

The battalion will reportedly be given only one month of training before being deployed. Its initial function, according to a *New York Times* report, will be the “gathering of intelligence on guerilla activities and possibly conducting house raids”. The *Post* outlined its role as “apprehending Hussein loyalists and other insurgents” in and around Baghdad, with its missions requiring the approval of the US military command.

Each company of the unit will work with a US Special Forces “A-Team”—normally a 12-man unit of Green Berets with specialised training in covert operations. Within a short period, however, the Iraqi unit will be given the authority to conduct its own “full-fledged counterinsurgency operations”.

The immediate question posed by the decision is why the US has sanctioned such a formation. The Bush administration has claimed up until now that it planned to hand over control of Iraq to a state apparatus that did not owe its loyalties to particular parties or individual political leaders. The US has also claimed to be assembling a politically non-partisan public service and judiciary.

The White House has declared it will hand over

sovereignty of Iraq to a provisional Iraqi government in six months time. Now, a military unit is being recruited from individuals whose loyalties expressly lie with ethnic or sectarian-based parties or, in the case of the Iraqi National Congress militia, to its leader Ahmed Chalabi.

The implications have not been lost in Iraq. Ghazi Yawar, an independent member of the Governing Council, told the media the plan had only been discussed between the participating parties and the US military: “I’m very outraged. This can lead to warlords and civil war. Should I form my own militia?... We should be dissolving the militias, not finding ways to legitimise them. This sends the wrong message to the Iraqi people.”

The highest Sunni Muslim religious body, the Committee of Muslim Ulama, condemned the plan as “a way to divide and rule by exploiting confessionalism and racism”. The clerics warned that it would heighten divisions in the country and drive Sunnis “into the arms of the opposition”.

Even more ominous is the question: what functions will the “counterterrorism battalion” perform that are not already being carried out by the existing security forces? Iraq is occupied by over 150,000 American and other foreign troops. Hundreds of US intelligence and special forces operatives are in the country and have been involved in hunting down the so-called “deck-of-cards” list of senior leaders of the former Baathist regime. The Provisional Authority claims to have already recruited some 140,000 Iraqis into a new police force, civil defence paramilitary and army, and, according to US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, will have 225,000 in service by mid-2004. Elements of the Iraqi forces are already being widely used by the US in operations against resistance.

What need is there for the militia-based unit?

A feature in the December 8 *New Yorker* magazine provides the likely answer. Based on the material gathered by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, the US military is shifting to new anti-insurgency tactics in Iraq that Pentagon officials have already christened “pre-emptive man-hunting”. Drawing on the advice and experiences of the

Israelis in the Occupied Territories, the US intends to use Iraqi agents to infiltrate grass-root resistance groups, identify their members, suppliers and financiers, and dispatch US special forces to assassinate them.

The shift to a policy of assassinations—a war crime under international law—has inevitably evoked parallels with “Operation Phoenix” during the Vietnam War. In 1967, unable to crush guerilla operations in southern Vietnam, the US launched a campaign of assassinations against alleged partisans of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front (Viet Cong). The campaign of slaughter lasted well into 1973. One estimate is that between 1968 and 1972 over 26,000 suspected Viet Cong—political activists, village heads, teachers and guerilla fighters—were murdered by US special forces and South Vietnamese agents in an attempt to behead the resistance. Another 33,000 people were detained without charges and subjected to brutal interrogation to extract information on Viet Cong activities.

Hersh’s report indicates that the turn to hit squads in Iraq stems from the failure of months of repression to crush resistance. Since May, the American military has conducted hundreds of raids and detained as many as 50,000 Iraqis, by some estimates, on suspicion of taking part in or supporting anti-US activity. The Provisional Authority admits that it is presently holding some 5,000 “suspects” in its network of prison camps. Attacks on the occupation have not only continued, however, but have spread throughout the country and become increasingly lethal.

The main impact of the US tactics has been to heighten Iraqi hostility toward the US troops and their local collaborators, and strengthen support for the resistance. According to Hersh’s sources, “the critical issue, American and Israeli officials agree, is intelligence.” A Pentagon official declared: “We’ve got this large conventional force sitting there and getting their ass shot off, and what we’re doing is counterproductive... We’ve got no intelligence and we’re too squeamish to operate in this part of the world.”

An advisor to the Provisional Authority in Baghdad summed up the conclusion that has been reached in US political and military circles: “The only way we can win is to go unconventional. We’re going to have to play their game. Guerilla versus guerilla. Terrorism versus terrorism. We’ve got to scare the Iraqis into submission.”

Israel’s main advice to the US has been to “learn how to maintain a network of informants” similar to those built up by the Israelis in the Occupied Territories. Israeli agents claim to have been able “to penetrate the West Bank and Gaza Strip organisations controlled by groups such as Hamas, and to assassinate or capture potential suicide bombers, along with many people who recruit and train them”.

New Yorker article points to a debate in US military circles over how to create such a network of Iraqi informants and agents, who will not be “squeamish” about finding or extracting information on the opponents of the American occupation.

Hersh indicates that the CIA is looking to recruit the former secret police of Saddam Hussein. A former CIA officer bluntly stated: “US shooters and Iraqi intelligence... We have to resuscitate Iraqi intelligence, holding our nose, and have Delta and agency shooters break down doors and take them [resistance fighters] out.”

Relying openly on elements from the Baathist apparatus would create obvious political problems however—both in Iraq and internationally. It would further undermine the US claims to have invaded in order to “liberate” Iraq.

The alternative is to use the forces of its political quislings as the public face of an Iraqi intelligence agency. The party militias are without doubt eminently qualified for the role. The Kurdish *pesh merga* and the forces around Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Alawi—the leader of the Iraqi National Accord—have worked in close association with US intelligence for well over a decade. At various times they have received American training in covert operations. At the same time, they know Iraq’s religions and languages and the intricacies of its ethnic and tribal customs.

Moreover, they have everything at stake in forcing the Iraqi people to submit to the American occupation. All the political parties contributing to the counterterrorism battalion openly collaborated with the US in its aggression against Iraq. Many Iraqis consider them traitors. The political authority they now hold, and the privileges flowing from it to their key supporters, depends upon the country’s permanent reduction to the status of a US client-state. Without the presence of US and allied troops, the Governing Council would not hold power for a day.

The militia-based unit will therefore have the incentive, as well as the expertise, to carry out spying, torture, murder and other dirty work for the Bush administration.



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