

Washington fields mercenary army in Iraq

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The killing and mutilation of four private security guards in Fallujah, on March 31, not only gave the US military the pretext to conduct the most brutal and sustained assault on Iraqis to date in its year long occupation of their country. It also revealed a large body of mercenaries operating throughout Iraq.

According to recent estimates there are around 15,000 private bodyguards and security personnel operating inside Iraq, of which at least 6,000 are believed to be armed—making them the second biggest military presence after the US Army. The number is set to increase even further—in what is being described as an Iraqi Klondike—after the so-called handover of sovereignty to the Iraqi Governing Council on June 30.

Thousands of former soldiers and police officers from the US, Britain, Australia, South Africa and elsewhere are being paid up to \$1,500 a day (many times a soldiers' wage) to protect Western dignitaries, oil company executives and construction firm bosses in Iraq. Private security firms are also employing veterans of anti-insurgency conflicts in Colombia and Algeria, former soldiers who fought in the Russian government's war in Chechnya and Chilean mercenaries trained during the brutal dictatorship of General Pinochet.

Two correspondents for the British *Observer* newspaper in Baghdad on April 18, recalled the bacchanalian atmosphere that existed amongst this community of hired thugs a year ago:

"In the first rush—after the fall of Baghdad—you would see French and Belgian ex-paratroops singing regimental songs in the Sheraton restaurant; steroid-pumped former US special forces; solitary Russian veterans of Chechnya; US women who were once police dog handlers; and scores of former British soldiers varying in age from 25 to 50."

Robert Fisk, writing in the *Independent on Sunday* on March 28, described the lawless and increasingly powerful role of these semi-military privateers in the Iraqi capital:

"Many companies operate from villas in middle-class areas of Baghdad with no name on the door. Some security men claim they can earn more than £80,000 a year: but short term, high-risk mercenary work can bring much higher rewards. Security personnel working a seven-day contract in cities like Fallujah can make \$1,000 a day.

"Although they wear no uniform, some security men carry personal identification on their flak jackets, along with their rifles and pistols. Others refuse to identify themselves even in hotels, drinking beer by the pool, their weapons at their feet. In several hotels, guests and staff have complained that security men have held drunken parties and one manager was forced to instruct mercenaries in his hotel that they must carry their guns in a bag when they leave the premises. His demand was ignored."

British security firms have won the largest share of private security contracts in Iraq. By the end of March, apart from ex-British soldiers and police, an estimated 1,500 former Special Air Service elite assassins, marines, paratroopers and Royal Ulster Constabulary officers were believed to be operating in Iraq's major cities. The SAS is said to be facing an unprecedented loss of personnel as its highly trained operatives are lured to Iraq by offers of lucrative security work.

The largest single contract has been awarded to Control Risks, which has so far accrued £23.5 million. It has 120 staff to protect around 150

British officials and business contractors. Another British-owned company, AmorGroup, presently supplies 20 security guards for the Foreign Office, and has been assured a dramatic increase in contracts from July. The firm also employs 500 Gurkhas to guard executives with the US companies Bechtel and Kellogg Root & Brown. Erinys, another British-run firm, employs 14,000 Iraqis as watchmen and security guards to protect Iraq's oil fields and pipelines.

David Claridge, company director for security firm Janusian, estimates that British firms have earned around £1 billion within the first year of the occupation—making private policing the UK's biggest export to Iraq.

A significant sum of the money being made by British security companies is being indirectly extracted from taxpayers. The *Independent on Sunday* revealed last month that the British Foreign Office and the Department for International Development has already spent £25 million on hiring private bodyguards, armed escorts and security advisers to protect civil servants. This figure is set to be dwarfed in July.

On a US government sponsored web site, *Services for American Citizens in Iraq* [http://travel.state.gov/iraq_amcitservices.html], under the section, "Security Companies doing Business in Iraq", there is a list of official security firms prefaced by the following disclaimer:

"The US government assumes no responsibility for the professional ability or integrity of the persons or firms whose names appear on the list."

Many of these companies have long since moved on from standard security work, such as guarding oil installation and construction sites, and have become increasingly involved in the military occupation. Armed security contractors from an American firm now guard US troops during the night as they reside inside the former presidential palace—the residence of US administrator Paul Bremer. When a US helicopter crashed near Fallujah last year, an American security firm took control of the area and began rescue operations.

Speaking on the nature of the work of these companies, CNN national security analyst Ken Robinson said, "They provide very focused security for detailing out how a protectee's day occurs—from the beginning of the morning until they tuck that person back into bed at night.... These are typically former special operations community personnel who are highly trained in the use of deadly force, also in surveillance detection and also in risk avoidance."

Unnamed sources have told CNN that the Pentagon is urging contracting companies not to speak to the media about the dangers in Iraq, claiming that it makes things more dangerous for their workers who are willing to take the risk.

The US firm, Blackwater Security Consulting (a division of Blackwater USA), which employed the four security guards killed in Fallujah, is one of a growing number of contractors that are hiring army veterans for jobs previously assigned to the military. Blackwater is also a typical example of the proliferation of military hybrid firms. Headed by former US Navy SEALs, the company has its roots in the Special Operations community and was founded to take advantage of business opportunities created by the downsizing of parts of the US military.

The company is based in Moyock at a 6,000 acre site in rural North

Carolina, a campus the company calls “the most comprehensive private tactical training facility in the United States.”

Blackwater’s web site advertises its services by stating; “Our mission is to provide the client with veteran military, intelligence and law enforcement professionals with demonstrated field operations performance tempered with mature experience in both foreign and domestic requirements. We employ only the most highly motivated and professional operators, all drawn from various US and international Special Operations Forces, Intelligence and Law Enforcement organisations.”

Blackwater currently has 450 employees in Iraq, many of them providing security to Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) employees and to VIPs visiting Iraq. The company has applied to occupy a former MIG air base near Baghdad as a “counterterrorism training facility” for Iraqi forces. The training range will mirror the 6,000-acre Moyock site, which is frequented by US law enforcement and military personnel.

Just how heavily involved such firms as Blackwater are in the waging of the US-led military offensive in Iraq, was confirmed by a report carried by the *Washington Post* on April 6. Detailing an attack by the Iraqi resistance on a US post in Najaf four days after the killing of the Blackwater guards, the paper reported, “An attack by hundreds of Iraqi militia members on the US government’s headquarters in Najaf on Sunday was repulsed not by the US military, but by eight commandos from a private security firm, according to sources familiar with the incident.

“Before US reinforcements could arrive, the firm, Blackwater Security Consulting, sent in its own helicopters amid an intense firefight to resupply its commandos with ammunition and to ferry out a wounded Marine, the sources said.

“... Shiite militia forces barraged the Blackwater commandos, four MPs and a Marine gunner with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47 fire for hours before US Special Forces troops arrived. A sniper on a nearby roof apparently wounded three men. US troops faced heavy fighting in several Iraqi cities that day.”

During the fierce and bloody confrontation, thousands of rounds were fired and hundreds of 40 mm grenades shot. Sources who asked not to be identified because of the “sensitivity” of Blackwater’s work in Iraq reported an unspecified number of casualties among Iraqis.

At a news conference held near the scene of the fighting the following day, Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt of the US military avoided speaking on the specific role of the Blackwater men. He simply added, somewhat cryptically, “They knew what they were here for ...They’d lost three wounded. We were sitting there among the bullet shells—the bullet casings—and, frankly, the blood of their comrades, and they were absolutely confident.”

A spokesman for Blackwater later confirmed that the company had a contract to provide security to the CPA, but would not describe the incident that unfolded. A Defence Department spokesman said that there were no military reports about the opening hours of the fighting at the US headquarters in Najaf because there were no military personnel on the scene.

According to Rick Bardon of the Center for Strategic & International Studies, “There are something like 150 attacks per day of one kind or another and most of them are intercepted.... So there’s been some success in reducing the impact of these attacks, but that’s a lot of action that we’re involved in all over the country.”

As the increasingly military role of private security personnel becomes apparent, they have become a more frequent target of attack by the Iraqi resistance. At least six security guards were killed during April, including Mike Bloss, a former British paratrooper who served in Northern Ireland and the kidnapped Italian, Fabrizio Quattrocchi, although the CPA does not include them in the official body count report.

In response there are growing calls by private companies for the right of

their employees to officially carry more powerful weaponry. There is also increasing resentment within the private security industry that coalition forces have been unable or unwilling to come to their aid when they have been under fire.

The *Guardian* newspaper, April 17, carried a revealing account of a firefight in the town of Kut, 100 miles south-east of Baghdad, just two days after the Blackwater/Najaf incident, between Iraqis and five security personnel of the Hart Group, a Bermuda-registered security consultancy run by former SAS and Scots Guards officer Richard Bethell (son of Lord Westbury).

Gray Branfield, a South African security guard, was killed during the battle after coalition forces from Ukraine failed to respond to repeated pleas for assistance from the small group of besieged guards.

“On April 6 the house where the five Hart Group bodyguards were living in, was attacked by a large group, believed to be followers of the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Desperate calls were made to the local coalition forces. A Ukrainian unit finally answered and promised assistance. It never came. Coalition forces in Baghdad were also contacted and a rescue attempt was promised, but again it never came.

“The house’s defences were breached and the five bodyguards retreated to the roof. The Iraqis fatally wounded Mr Branfield, but the four surviving men continued to defend the roof against small arms and grenade attack for more than six hours. During this time there were at least six promises that a rescue mission was on its way. As dawn broke the four surviving members of the team managed to escape.”

It later emerged that the Ukrainian unit had evacuated the nearby CPA headquarters during the night without informing the four security men or attempting to assist them.

An unnamed source for Hart Group said of the incident, “All of the security companies assumed that if you got into a tight corner they would come and help you out, I cannot really answer for other security companies, but there is a feeling among many that we should be asking some questions and if we are not going to be supported then we need to be able to carry heavier weaponry.”

There is every likelihood that these demands will be heeded by the US occupation forces. Under an agreement with the CPA private security guards are officially only allowed to carry small personal protection weapons, but this is routinely ignored by both parties. According to a source at Hart, discussions were already under way with the authorities governing Iraq to allow bodyguards to increase their firepower. The UK’s largest private security firm, Global Risk Strategies, (which is set to vastly increase its presence in Iraq) has held negotiations with the CPA and Iraqi Governing Council to draft new regulations.

In the context of an increasingly bloody military occupation, where larger parts of the population are actively opposing the US-led armies, and where the resolve of more and more ordinary soldiers is failing as they become sickened by what they are being called upon to do, a new layer of highly paid and trained thugs is being prepared to carry out further atrocities. Already, there are reports of secretive hired elements leading interrogations and torture of incarcerated Iraqis.

This process is intensifying as the June 30 deadline approaches. Businesses representing the largest energy and construction companies in the world—including Shell, Volvo, Chevron, Texaco, Pfizer and Kodak—gathered recently at a secret location in central London, to finalise billions of dollars of contracts for Iraq. Many expressed their concern about the impact of the deteriorating security situation on their future ventures. Some of the same companies attending had declined to go to a recent conference organised by the CPA for the oil industry, in Basra. The conference has now been cancelled.

There was also only muted interest in the ambitiously named Baghdad Expo, due to take place at the end of the month. It has been moved to the northern town of Sulaymania. An Iraqi official explained, “It is much

safer there.”

Germany and France have already issued official advice to their citizens to leave Iraq. And Russia’s largest contractor in the country, the power station builder Technopromexport, announced it was pulling out its 370 employees after eight Russia workers were kidnapped in Baghdad. Even the BBC has dramatically scaled back its staff in Iraq and banned programme-makers from organising any new trips there.

The UK firm, Amec (whose chief executive, Sir Peter Mason, recently joined the growing ranks of businessmen being paid more than £1 million a year for reconstruction work in Iraq) with its US partner, Fluor, won a \$1.1 billion (£617 million) deal last month to help restore Iraq’s water system. But it has yet to receive the detailed task orders on its contract from the CPA. When it does, in the next few weeks, the company has said it will decide whether to risk flying out more staff to start work on the project, or delay it. Other British companies, such as the engineering groups Halcrow and Foster Wheeler, which also have staff in Iraq, refuse to discuss their plans in the light of the worsening security situation.

Nick Day, the chief operating officer of Diligence Information & Security (DI&S), a security firm, said, “Commercial contractors are considering their positions in Iraq. They are either partially withdrawing their expatriates or keeping a low profile to see how the situation pans out.”

Day intimated that for those companies waiting to see if the security situation stabilises, the outlook, in the short term at least, does not look good. “The US is poised to take action in the south, and there are concerns over the repercussions from that. There is talk of the trouble getting worse at the end of April as people try to destabilise the country before the next month’s handover.”

One unnamed chief executive of a large UK company underlined the thinking of many companies already on the ground:

“When things are going wrong, the first thing you are told is to stay where you are. You get hurt when you move.... We took a decision early on that we would only do work where our people are protected by the military. I wake up each morning and thank God that this is the case, as we are in some pretty hairy places.”

Other companies that have yet to go into Iraq are weighing their options. Colin Adams, the chairman of the British Consultants and Construction Bureau, said, “The companies which are well established have not shown any indication of pulling out. The more difficult decisions must be made for those who are thinking of going into Iraq.”

The UK construction firm Serco has just completed work on a contract to manage airport services in Baghdad and Basra. A spokesman issued a cautious statement, saying; “We will monitor the security situation before bidding [for any more contracts].”

Another significant factor facing companies in Iraq is the dramatic increase in the cost of insurance. Brokers in London say that in the past 10 days, premiums have doubled. Anne Williams, a director at insurance broker Heath Lambert, quotes a premium of six percent to insure higher-risk professions such as journalists or security guards. With the cover paying out up to \$250,000 in case of death or injury (for more senior staff, the maximum can rise to \$500,000), such a policy would cost \$15,000. This makes it 12 times more expensive than, for example, the average policy in Afghanistan (where premiums are typically 0.5 percent) or 24 times more expensive than in Saudi Arabia (0.25 percent). But despite the higher prices, demand is still there. “There is a lot of business to chase,” said Williams.

The World Bank has identified \$55 billion worth of work needed to rebuild Iraq over the next four years. Of that only \$33 billion was pledged at the Madrid donors’ conference in October.

For the major corporations in Iraq, therefore, far too much is at stake in terms of lucrative contracts for the wishes of the population or the legal conduct of war to get in the way. There is every indication that further

repression of Iraqis will be exacted in the most ruthless manner.

As Mike Baker, chief executive of Diligence LLC (a Washington security firm with hundreds of employees in Iraq) and former CIA case officer said of the prospect of using hired killers in the military upsurge:

“No one is retreating ... No one is calling saying we ought to pull our guys out. I don’t think it’s stopping anyone from going in. They are fully aware of the security situation.” Baker added that how the military is “responding is going to be very important. If there’s not a harsh, well-thought-out response [to the Iraqi resistance], they will take that as a complete sign of weakness and they will become emboldened.”



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