

The “Salvador option”

Pentagon plans death squad terror in Iraq

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Faced with intractable and growing armed resistance in Iraq, the Pentagon has drafted plans for the organization of death squads to assassinate political opponents of the US military occupation and terrorize the civilian population.

The plan, first reported January 8 by *Newsweek* magazine, has been dubbed by Pentagon planners as “the Salvador option.” It is a measure of the growing desperation within the White House and the US military command over the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

“We have to find a way to take the offensive against the insurgents,” a senior US military officer told *Newsweek*. “Right now, we are playing defense and we are losing.”

With barely three weeks to go until the January 30 US-sponsored election, the number and scale of attacks has continued to mount. The military siege that reduced the city of Fallujah to rubble has not only failed to “break the back of the insurgency,” as promised by US military commanders, but has led to its intensification across much of the country.

The elections themselves—which are supposed to create a transitional body to draft a new constitution—will resolve nothing.

The article cited the little-reported assessment given by General Muhammad Abdallah al-Shahwani, director of the Iraqi puppet regime’s intelligence service, that the resistance is 200,000-strong and enjoys broad sympathy, particularly in Sunni areas.

A US military official, who agreed with this assessment, told *Newsweek*: “The Sunni population is paying no price for the support it is giving to the terrorists. From their point of view, it is cost-free. We have to change that equation.”

As the occupation authorities see it, those who choose to collaborate with them are paying a very heavy and visible price in the form of assassination of political leaders, bombings of police stations and wholesale killing of militiamen. The purpose of the plan is to exact a similar price from those who oppose the occupation.

This would be the key objective of the so-called Salvador option. As those who sympathize and support the resistance are far less easily identified than Iraqis who join the US puppet regime and its security forces, however, such terror could only be carried out in the form of collective punishment upon entire

populations.

Rules of engagement under the Salvador option would amount to massacring civilians in villages and neighborhoods where US troops and their Iraqi collaborators come under fire, on the theory that such atrocities would dissuade civilians from harboring resistance fighters. Torture, already widely used in Iraq, would become a systematic means not merely of gathering information, but of terrorizing those who are tortured as well as those who learn of their fate.

The bloody counterinsurgency campaign waged by Washington and the dictatorships in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras in the 1970s and 1980s was founded on such methods. It is still considered a success story by those who occupy top positions within the Bush administration.

Not a few of them played a direct role in these bloody events. Washington’s current ambassador to Iraq—who has run the Iraqi puppet regime while remaining well hidden from the public eye—is John Negroponte. From 1981 to 1985, Negroponte was Washington’s envoy to Honduras. This was a period in which Honduras served as a staging area for US military operations throughout the region, including both the CIA-organized “contra” war against Nicaragua and the repressive operations in El Salvador. Death squads carried out a wave of kidnappings and executions in Honduras itself, even as Washington increased military aid to the regime there by 400 percent.

Similarly, the Bush administration brought back Elliott Abrams, who as the Reagan administration’s assistant secretary for Inter-American affairs served as the principal public defender of Central America’s right-wing dictatorships, and was convicted in 1991 of withholding information from Congress in relation to the Iran-contra affair. He is now the senior adviser on the Middle East for the Bush White House.

Washington managed to quell the popular uprisings in Central America only through massive bloodshed. In El Salvador, at the height of the repression in the early 1980s, military and police death squads were killing over 13,000 people a year.

Entire layers of the population were subjected to systematic extermination—principally militant workers, students and peasants together with their families and friends. Given the country’s population—less than 5 million—the death toll was

analogous to more than three-quarters of a million political murders annually in a country the size of the United States.

Throughout this period, the Reagan administration increased military aid to the Salvadoran regime, while submitting reports to Congress insisting that the regime was making a “concerted and significant effort” to improve human rights conditions.

Those who headed the death squads—men like Roberto D’Aubuisson, known as “Major Blowtorch” because of his personal participation in torture—were paid assets of the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Socorro Juridico, the legal aid society of the Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador, issued a report in June 1980, describing a 50-day period in which it had recorded the torture, assassination or massacre of more than 2,000 people at the hands of the death squads:

“In qualitative terms, the reign of terror would appear to be the most distinctive characteristic of this period. The cruelty of tortures practiced against the victims of the repression had no precedent in the previous stages. The corpses appeared scalped, beheaded, with throats cut or dismembered. The heads of the decapitated began to appear hung from trees or impaled on fences. In addition to the paramilitary-based repression, large-scale military operations were mounted in the north and central-east regions of the country. Massacres included women and children fleeing.... In the towns, members of the teaching profession and students, health employees and the church were victims of repression without mercy at the hands of the armed forces.”

Amnesty International issued a report in 1982 describing the continued repressive violence throughout the country:

“The security forces in El Salvador have been carrying out a systematic and widespread program of torture, ‘disappearances’ and individual and mass killings of men, women and children. The victims have included not only people suspected of opposition to the authorities, but thousands who were simply in areas targeted for security operations, whose death or mutilation seems to have been completely arbitrary.”

In neighboring Guatemala the level of killing was even more horrific. A UN-sponsored commission concluded that a succession of US-backed military dictatorships murdered some 200,000 people in the country. Under General Efraim Rios Montt, who enjoyed the enthusiastic backing of the Reagan administration, the bloodbath unleashed against the Mayan Indian population of the central highlands reached the level of “genocide,” according to the report.

This is the reality of the Salvador option under consideration at the Pentagon. There are, however, significant differences between the US intervention in Central America and the occupation of Iraq. In Guatemala and El Salvador, US imperialism was able to work through entrenched native oligarchies and armies that had been trained by the Pentagon and which had decades of experience in suppressing the

masses.

In Iraq, Washington confronts a situation in which newly established security forces “melt away” whenever confronted with serious resistance from Iraqi forces opposed to the occupation.

According to the *Newsweek* article, the plans being considered call for the use of US Special Forces, both directly and as “advisers” to such elements as the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite militiamen in forming the death squads.

To the extent that Washington is successful in recruiting such indigenous forces to carry out its dirty work, the effect will be to unleash a full-scale civil war between Iraq’s divergent ethno-religious populations.

In all likelihood, however, the bulk of the killing will be left to US troops. The *Newsweek* report states that under contemplation are Green Beret-led cross-border raids into Syria aimed at assassinating or “snatching” Iraqi exiles opposed to the US occupation. The magazine states that those abducted would be “sent to secret facilities for interrogation,” meaning that the methods of torture exposed at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere will spread.

The thinking underlying the proposal for a “Salvador option” is that the effective utilization of assassination and terror by the Iraqi resistance against those collaborating with the US occupation can only be countered by even greater terror by Washington and its stooges against those who oppose it.

This opposition, however, encompasses broad masses of the Iraqi population. To crush this opposition through the use of Salvadoran methods means a level of killing that goes far beyond the slaughter that has already been inflicted upon the Iraqi people.

Thus, the Bush administration’s pursuit of the so-called war on terrorism in Iraq now threatens to plunge the US military into unprecedented acts of mass terror.



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