

Iraq suspends license of Blackwater USA

US mercenary firm denounced after civilian killings in Baghdad

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18 September 2007

The Iraqi government on Monday said it had revoked the operating license of Blackwater USA, following a shootout involving the private security company in downtown Baghdad Sunday that left at least nine people dead and 14 wounded, the majority civilians.

Iraqi Interior Ministry spokesman Brig. Gen. Abdul Kareem Khalaf said that the decision meant that Blackwater “cannot work in Iraq any longer, it will be illegal for them to work here.” Khalaf added, “Security contracts do not allow them to shoot people randomly.”

The bloody incident on Sunday focuses attention on the mercenary activities of the estimated 25,000-30,000 private contractors from some 60 companies operating in Iraq at the service of the US occupation, forming an integral part of the illegal war and occupation. With revenues of about \$100 billion a year, these hired thugs pilot helicopters and patrol in bulletproof vehicles; many are armed with automatic weapons.

Blackwater USA has an estimated 1,000 employees in Iraq, and at least \$800 million in government contracts. One of its main contracts is to provide security to US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and other diplomats. The company has also guarded Gen. David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq.

Blackwater has earned the fear and hatred of the Iraqi civilian population, particularly in Baghdad, where its heavily armed agents speed diplomatic convoys through the crowded streets in black SUVs and its “Little Bird” helicopters swarm overhead, riflemen at the windows to provide cover to ground-based convoys.

The shooting on Sunday was touched off when a car bomb reportedly exploded near a State Department motorcade in the Mansour district in western Baghdad. According to US Embassy officials, Blackwater employees opened fire, leaving at least nine people dead and wounding 14 others. Iraq Interior ministry spokesman Khalaf put the death toll at 11.

Hussein Abdul-Abbas, the owner of a mobile phone store in the area, told Associated Press, “We saw a convoy of SUVs passing in the street nearby. One minute later, we heard the sound of a bomb explosion followed by gunfire that lasted for 20 minutes between gunmen and the convoy people who were foreigners and dressed in civilian clothes. Everybody in the street started to flee immediately.”

Lawyer Hassan Jabar Salman, another eyewitness, recounted details of the Sunday incident to Agence France Presse as he lay wrapped in bloodied bandages in Baghdad’s Al-Yarmukh Hospital. Salman said he was hit by five bullets as he tried to flee the scene in his car. He said he heard an explosion and saw a two-car convoy ahead.

“The foreigners in the convoy started shouting and signaling to us to

go back,” Salman said. “I turned around and must have driven 100 feet (30 meters) when they started shooting.”

“There were eight of them in four utility vehicles and all shooting with heavy machine guns,” he added. “My car was hit with 12 bullets, of which four hit me in the back and one in the arm.” Salmon said he witnessed the killing of a woman and a traffic policeman, and “dozens of people hitting the ground to avoid the barrage of bullets,” according to AFP.

Following the incident, US embassy spokesperson Mirembe Nantongo did not immediately confirm the cancellation of Blackwater’s license. W. Johann Schmonsees, embassy information officer, told reporters that the company had not “been expelled from the country yet.”

US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said that the Diplomatic Security Service had launched an official investigation into what he described as a “terrible incident.” He was quick to cast blame on the Iraqi population, commenting, “We are fighting people who don’t play by any rules.”

Iraqi Interior Ministry spokesman Khalaf stated, “We have opened a criminal investigation against the group who committed the crime.” Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki condemned the shootings as a “crime” committed by a “foreign service company,” although it is unclear whether the Iraqi government holds the power to regulate Blackwater’s operations.

Under the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) led by L. Paul Bremer in the early days of the occupation, a regulation was adopted known as Order 17, which effectively grants immunity to US security contractors and shields them from prosecution in Iraqi courts.

Under the order crafted by the Bush administration, all foreign personnel—private and military—are exempt from “local criminal, civil and administrative jurisdiction and from any form of arrest or detention other than by persons acting on behalf of their parent states.”

Order 17 was renewed before the “transfer of sovereignty” to the unelected Iraqi interim government in late June 2004. The measure allows the US military—as well as its hired mercenaries such as Blackwell—to carry out the killing of civilians, destroy homes and property and commit other war crimes such as extra-legal detention and torture of prisoners without fear of prosecution by Iraqi authorities.

While another CPA order requires security contractors to register with the Ministry of Interior, a number have not done so. The license obtained by Blackwater in 2005 has reportedly lapsed and the

company has been having trouble getting it renewed, but has remained in the country nevertheless.

The Iraqi population closely identifies the activities of these military contractors with the brutality of the US occupation. On March 31, 2004, a Blackwater convoy was ambushed in Fallujah and four armed contractors were killed, their charred bodies subsequently hung over a bridge crossing the Euphrates.

Photographs of the slain contractors' corpses were released to the news media, with the images used to condition public opinion for the impending assault on Fallujah. In November 2004, the US launched Operation Phantom Fury, laying siege to and virtually leveling the city of 300,000. Thousands of civilians were massacred and about 100 US Marines died in the operation.

More recently, in late May of this year, Blackwater employees opened fire in the streets of Baghdad twice in two days. On May 23, a US convoy under Blackwater protection was ambushed in downtown Baghdad, setting off a raging battle in which security contractors, US and Iraqi troops and AH-64 Apache attack helicopters were firing in a congested area.

Mohammed Mahdi, 37, an employee at a veterinary drugstore, told the *Washington Post* that the battle lasted for nearly an hour, and that afterwards he saw "four mini-buses, a taxi and an Opel sedan containing dead and wounded. He said that he saw 'at least four or five' people 'who were certainly dead' but that he did not know how the people were killed, who killed them or whether they were civilians or combatants."

On May 24, an Iraqi driver was shot and killed near the Interior Ministry by a Blackwater guard, who claimed the victim had driven too close to their convoy. The Iraqi Interior Ministry had received four previous complaints of shooting incidents involving Blackwater in the two years previous to this incident.

Matthew Degn, a senior American civilian adviser to the Interior Ministry's intelligence directorate, commented at the time that he was concerned the incident "could undermine a lot of the cordial relationships that have been built up over the past four years."

These cordial relationships between US forces and private security firms—and, in particular, the connections between Blackwater and the Republican Party—have indeed been key in perpetuating the occupation in Iraq.

Blackwater USA was founded in 1997, and markets itself as "The most comprehensive professional military, law enforcement, security, peacekeeping and stability operations company in the world." It receives at least 90 percent of its revenue from government contracts, two-thirds of which are on a no-bid basis.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Blackwater worked under a no-bid contract with the Department of Homeland Security at a cost of \$240,000 a day, operating as a security force whose main task was protecting government facilities.

Blackwater trains more than 40,000 people a year at its 7,000-acre base in Camden and Currituck Counties, North Carolina, which is composed of firing ranges, and indoor, outdoor and urban reproductions. Company promotional material boasts the company runs "the largest privately owned firearms training facility in the nation." Blackwater also has a facility in Mount Carroll, Illinois and is looking to open another in California for military training.

In 2003, Blackwater was awarded the contract to guard Ambassador L. Paul Bremer at a cost of \$21 million for 11 months. The company has been paid more than \$320 million since June 2004 out of the US State Department's five-year, \$1 billion budget for the Worldwide

Personal Protective Service—to protect US and some foreign officials in Iraq and elsewhere. In 2006, Blackwater won the contract to protect the colossal US embassy in Baghdad.

Blackwater founder and owner Erik Prince is a former Navy SEAL and millionaire who personally financed the formation of the company at the age of 27. Prince is the brother of Betsy DeVos, a former chairman of the Republican Party of Michigan and wife of billionaire Amway heir Dick DeVos, the party's 2006 Michigan gubernatorial candidate.

Prince was an intern in the senior George Bush's White House and campaigned for ultra-right Republican presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan in 1992. Prince and Blackwater President Gary Jackson, also a former Navy SEAL, are major contributors to the Republican Party.

Prince now runs Prince Group, Blackwater's parent company. He also serves as a board member of Christian Freedom International, a group whose self-proclaimed mission is helping "Christians who are persecuted for their faith in Jesus Christ."

Cofer Black, vice chairman of Blackwater USA since February 2005, worked in the Directorate of Operations at the Central Intelligence Agency for 28 years, and was appointed director of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center (CTC) in 1999. From December 2002 to November 2004 he was the US Department of State coordinator for counterterrorism, with the rank of ambassador at large.

Black is also chairman of Total Intelligence Solutions, providing "Fortune 1000 companies with the only comprehensive and complete solution for private intelligence" (totalintel.com).

He is also CEO of The Black Group LLC, which advertises the company's services on its web site: "The Black Group brings an unmatched skill set to the private sector. With corporations facing potential threats designed to cripple the global economy, The Black Group offers executives a variety of options; protection for travel to high threat locations, business intelligence, threat assessments, specialized investigations, and tools to detect biological/chemical threats. We can tailor a solution to meet your unique security needs."



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