

Assassination without borders

# CIA and mercenaries plotted murder of German citizen

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Four years ago in Hamburg, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and mercenary firm Blackwater planned and prepared the assassination of the German-Syrian businessman Mamoun Darkazanli. This is reported by the American magazine *Vanity Fair* in its January issue. The report has unleashed considerable turmoil in German political circles. It reveals that the policy of targeted killing, the liquidation of alleged terrorists by the US, does not stop at the borders of Afghanistan, Pakistan or Yemen. It is also practiced on the territory of Washington's NATO allies.

The information about the plans to murder Darkazanli can be found in a lengthy article about Erik Prince, the boss and founder of Blackwater, now called XE. Prince founded the company in the mid-1990s with the help of an inheritance worth billions. This former member of the elite US Navy Seals offered to provide specialised training for US military units at the company's premises in North Carolina.

Blackwater's big moment came with the declaration of the "war on terror" by President George W. Bush. The company evolved into a private army, which could be deployed wherever it was too hot for the military or intelligence forces. Between 2001 and 2009, it collected more than \$1.5 billion from the US government. In 2008 alone, the firm's revenues amounted to \$600 million.

In addition to training troops, Blackwater provides personal security in the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, and also carries out the provisioning of US forces in inaccessible areas. Mercenaries employed by the company have repeatedly caused headlines because of their brutality and trigger-happy approach. On March 31, 2004, four Blackwater employees were killed and their bodies later hung from a bridge by an angry crowd in Fallujah; on September 16, 2007, at an intersection in Baghdad, a group of Blackwater bodyguards shot wildly and killed 17 civilians.

Above all, Blackwater plays a key role in the targeted killings of alleged terrorists. The private company hunts down opponents of the US government in countries where the military and intelligence agencies have no access; they

participate in air strikes with pilotless drones and organise death squads. The firm works closely with the CIA. The links between the two are very fluid. Prince himself has played a dual role for six years. Officially, he is CEO of Blackwater; unofficially, he is an agent and one of the most important assets of the CIA.

Leading intelligence personnel, such as J. Cofer Black, the former head of the CIA's Counter Terrorism Center, Enrique Prado, the center's former chief of operations, and Rob Richer, formerly the second-in-command of the agency's clandestine service, have transferred from the CIA to Blackwater.

Blackwater often performs tasks with which official US agencies do not want to be publicly associated for foreign policy or legal reasons. "We were building a unilateral unattributable capability. If it went bad, we weren't expecting the chief of station, the ambassador, or anyone to bail us out," Prince told *Vanity Fair*.

The Blackwater boss agreed to speak with *Vanity Fair* because he feels betrayed by the Obama administration. Last summer, the US media reported on the collaboration between the CIA and Blackwater, and about their murderous programme. Prince, who believes a Democratic congressman passed the information to the press, is angry.

The author of the *Vanity Fair* article, Adam Ciralski, knows something about the CIA, having previously worked for the agency as a lawyer. In addition to Prince's comments, his article also uses other insider information.

According to Ciralski, the assassination plot against Mamoun Darkazanli was developed under a CIA programme aimed at the assassination of leading Al Qaeda members. To this end, the CIA had set up a team of agents whose job description reads: "Find, fix and finish." The responsibility for this programme was then gradually handed over to Blackwater.

Hamburg businessman Darkazanli, a German citizen of Syrian origin, has been under surveillance by the CIA since 1993. His phone number was allegedly found on a terror suspect arrested in Africa. In subsequent years, it was also said to have turned up among European jihadists. In addition, Darkazanli was alleged to have arranged the sale of a ship to

Osama bin Laden's terrorist group and to have possessed power of attorney over an account of the Al Qaeda finance chief.

He was also said to have been in contact with the student group in Hamburg that organised the attacks of September 2001. In the summer of 2002, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that the CIA had tried to recruit Darkazanli as an agent in Hamburg in 1999. At that time, the preparations for the 9/11 attacks were already underway.

Two days after the 2001 attacks, officials from Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office searched Darkazanli's apartment in Hamburg. Three weeks later, federal prosecutors opened an investigation against him on suspicion of being involved in terrorism. But this never led to any charges, and the investigation was halted in the summer of 2006 when federal prosecutors could find no specific ties between his business relationships with Al Qaeda leaders and their terrorist objectives.

A Spanish attempt to have Darkazanli extradited failed in the summer of 2005 because Germany's Supreme Court declared the law invalid that would have allowed the extradition of German citizens to other EU countries. Darkazanli, who had spent months in custody pending extradition, was then allowed to go free.

It was under these circumstances that the CIA and Blackwater prepared Darkazanli's assassination. According to *Vanity Fair*, "they followed Darkazanli for weeks and worked through the logistics of how and where they would take him down." Neither the German authorities nor the CIA bureau in Germany were allegedly informed about the planned action.

It is unlikely the US intelligence agency regarded the German-Syrian as a serious threat, given the intense surveillance he faced from German and American authorities. One reason for the assassination plot could be that Darkazanli was actually recruited by the CIA in 1999 and knew things that it wanted to cover up. In the end, he survived because the green light never came from above due to a "lack of political will," according to an anonymous CIA source cited by the magazine.

Darkazanli was apparently not the only target on the CIA-Blackwater death squad list. *Vanity Fair* names another potential victim as the Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan, who was alleged to have passed technical know-how about building a nuclear bomb to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

In Germany, the revelations about the assassination plot against Darkazanli have been met with outrage. The Hamburg state prosecutor is considering whether to launch an investigation into conspiracy to commit a crime. The domestic policy spokesman of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) parliamentary group, Dieter Wiefelspütz, said, "If confirmed, it was nothing more than a murder conspiracy," and has demanded an investigation. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) domestic policy expert Wolfgang Bosbach described the accusations as "breathtaking" and said that investigating them

was "highly explosive."

However, experience teaches that neither the SPD nor the CDU will seriously challenge the US authorities. Nevertheless, the murder plot against Darkazanli poses a warning. It shows that the policy of targeted killing knows no borders.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the US and its allies now routinely kill their opponents with targeted attacks. In Pakistan alone, 700 people have been killed by unmanned US drones in the past year, according to official sources. Just five major al-Qaida and Taliban leaders were killed as a result. For every "terrorist" killed, 140 innocent civilians die.

Even if one ignores the large number of civilians killed, it raises the question of who is a "terrorist" and who decides that. If the decision lies at the discretion of intelligence agents and mercenaries, it opens the door to political caprice. The Israeli government, a pioneer in the field of targeted killing, has systematically liquidated its political opponents in the ranks of the Palestinian national movement on the basis of charges of "terrorism."

Israel, the United States, and increasingly the European governments justify the policy of targeted killing with reference to the "war on terror." In war, their argument runs, it is permitted to kill the enemy, and therefore the liquidation of "terrorists" is justified. But this argument is entirely specious. Wars are fought between states, or in the case of a civil war, between armed organisations, but not against abstract concepts such as "terrorism." If one accepts this argument, all a government needs to do is brand its opponents as "terrorists" in order to murder them, in violation of international law.

In this respect, the murder plot against Darkazanli is a new and sinister phenomenon. If a hit squad comprising CIA agents and Blackwater mercenaries can plot the murder of a German citizen in Hamburg, a man twice set free by the German courts, then it is only a matter of time before similar attacks take place in Paris, London and Tokyo—or in Washington, New York and San Francisco.



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