

# Australian special forces working with sectarian Shiite troops in Iraq

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An article published in the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald* on January 10 revealed some information about the role being performed by the 200 Australian special forces troops sent into Iraq last November as part of the renewed US-led war in the Middle East.

The newspaper reported that the Australian commandos are attached to a brigade of Iraqi special forces with a long record of sectarian killings and other atrocities. The article states that Prime Minister Tony Abbott confirmed that Australian special forces are providing both “training and assistance” to the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS).

Fairfax media outlets previously reported on January 4 that the Australian troops are accompanying Iraqi forces beyond Baghdad.

A report published by Reuters in March 2014 established that the Iraqi government’s CTS forces functioned as sectarian death squads, murdering anyone suspected of opposing the Shiite US puppet regime, then headed by Nouri al-Maliki. Its operations were focused against Iraq’s Sunni minority population, where resistance to the US occupation and the Maliki government was concentrated.

The report quoted an unnamed Iraqi special forces soldier as saying: “Whoever we capture now as a terrorist we kill him on the spot, except for someone we want to investigate. I’ve watched dozens executed.” Holding up a picture showing a dead body—a person murdered by CTS troops—lying beside a gun, he said: “After we kill them, then we plant the weapon by his side.”

The soldier described the militants as “infidels,” and added that “all the military is doing it.” The report also cited an unnamed senior general in Baghdad, who confirmed that the special forces were carrying out

extra-judicial executions, claiming that they were isolated cases.

Despite the Obama administration’s stated objective, echoed by the Australian government, of forming a more inclusive central government in Baghdad under Maliki’s successor as prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, these murderous activities are continuing.

The CTS was founded and trained by the occupying US force after 2003, and was primarily drawn from militia fighters loyal to the most sectarian and right-wing fundamentalist Shiite parties in Iraq. It is responsible only to the prime minister, not the defence department. Beginning in 2007, the group was massively expanded under al-Maliki, from 1,500 personnel to more than 12,000 in 2014.

Between 2006 and 2008, the US military turned toward a conscious strategy of promoting fratricidal sectarian warfare in order to drown in blood the resistance to the occupying forces. US forces gave the Shiite militias a free reign, as strongholds of the counter-insurgency such as Baghdad were turned into a living nightmare of civilian bombings and sectarian killings, in an attempt to terrorise the entire population.

These conditions enabled Al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—neither of which existed in Iraq before the US-led invasion—to gain a foothold in the country. Disoriented layers of the population, opposed to the occupation and alienated by the bankrupt Iraqi nationalism espoused by the Baathist party of former President Saddam Hussein, turned to fundamentalist Wahhabism, an extreme strand of Sunni Islam.

In 2014, ISIS’s capture of key Iraqi cities in western and northern Iraq was welcomed by layers of the local population, because of the degree of persecution and repression they suffered at the hands of the Iraqi

government and the very forces with which Australian troops are operating.

Because of their right-wing extremist ideology, the CTS forces are viewed by the US and Australian military as the most reliable detachments in the Iraq war. In March 2013, responsibility for collaborating with the CTS was transferred from the US military to the CIA. When large sections of the Iraqi army virtually disintegrated under the impact of the ISIS offensive in June 2014, the Iraqi Special Operations Force, which is the CTS's primary combat capability, took responsibility for the majority of the fighting by government forces.

While the Obama administration, its allies and the media have given widespread coverage to ISIS atrocities, they have turned a blind eye to the crimes carried out by Shia militias and government forces. The populations of towns previously occupied by ISIS have been brutally persecuted for their alleged sympathy with the militias. In some areas, a policy of ethnic cleansing has driven Sunnis out of towns inhabited by the majority Shiite population. (See: "US-backed militias commit war crimes in Iraq")

These developments explode the justification of the Obama administration and the Abbott government in Australia for their renewed intervention into Iraq. Far from being motivated by "humanitarianism" and the prevention of further sectarian atrocities, Australian troops are operating with forces that carry out no less horrifying and criminal acts than their fundamentalist Sunni counterparts.

Like the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the latest war in Iraq and Syria is a predatory intervention aimed at securing imperialist domination over the resource-rich and geo-strategic Middle East. Its purpose is to stabilise the deeply unpopular US-backed regime, and extend US military operations into the ongoing Syrian civil war.

The Obama administration has made clear that its intervention in Syria will only end with the removal of the Russian-backed government of Bashar al-Assad. It is only a matter of time before this underlying strategy takes the open form of direct military strikes.

In addition to the 200 Australian commandos, the Abbott government has dispatched six F-18 fighter-bomber Super Hornets and 400 military personnel to Iraq. According to a *Sydney Morning Herald* report on January 5, the Australian bombers have deployed 113

munitions in 180 sorties, destroying 36 targets. These have reportedly killed hundreds of people, including an unknown number of civilians. Abbott has strongly hinted that his government will increase its commitments in Iraq and extend its operations into Syria.

The different forces which the United States is backing in Iraq and Syria have led to innumerable contradictions. Many of the predominately Shiite security forces working closely with the Australian and US military in Iraq represent the same groups that have travelled across the border into Syria to support the Assad regime. At the same time, ISIS gained strength in Iraq through the funding and gun-running operation carried out in Syria by the CIA and its allies in Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait aimed at overthrowing Assad.

Underlying this contradictory policy is the determination of US imperialism and its allies to ensure their hegemonic domination over the entire Middle East.



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