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Waging A Private War: US Security Contractors In Iraq

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Blackwater Security

Iraq's Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki has repeatedly expressed grave misgivings about the activities of US 'Private Military Company' (PCM) Blackwater Security and has cited at least seven shooting incidents involving the company's security contractors which have led to the deaths of dozens of Iraqi citizens. Headquartered in Moyock, North Carolina, Blackwater – which is under contract to the US State Department - is currently operating in Iraq without an Iraq Interior Ministry licence. This absence of Iraqi oversight is compounded by a 2004 Coalition Provisional Authority law signed by Paul Bremer which grants Blackwater immunity from prosecution under Iraqi law. Blackwater is also not amenable to the US Military's Extraterritorial Judicial Act. Nor is it currently subject to the US military's Uniform Code of Military Justice. Blackwater Security is not accountable to the Iraqi government. Neither is it legally accountable to the US government for its para-military activities in Iraq.

Last Sunday, Blackwater Security contractors were involved in a controversial incident in the Nisoor Square area of Baghdad, a predominantly Sunni neighbourhood to the west of the city. According to official Iraqi government spokespersons as many as 20 Iraqi civilians were killed – including women and children – when Blackwater security contractors opened fire indiscriminately onto the busy street immediately following the detonation of a car-bomb in the square. The security contractors were escorting a State Department convoy of cars at the time – just metres from an official Iraqi army checkpoint – when Blackwater employees claim they became involved in a 'fire-fight' with an unknown number of 'insurgents' who attacked their convoy following the detonation of the car-bomb.

During this 'fire-fight', according to the Iraqi government, Blackwater personnel rained automatic gunfire in a 360 degree arc around their convoy for between 10 and 20 minutes following the car-bomb explosion. Blackwater Security has stated that this response was a 'legitimate' and 'appropriate' defensive action and has claimed that its personnel were involved in a sustained gun-battle with heavily armed insurgents at the time. In military terms, in such circumstances – in the tight confines of a city square with dense traffic – it would be considered very unusual for Blackwater personnel not to have sustained any casualties or injuries during such an exchange. The fact that only one of the State Department vehicles would appear to have been slightly damaged by the bomb blast – and none of the remainder apparently having been struck by bullets during the 'fire-fight' – would be considered in military circles to be highly unusual indeed, if not incredible.

Despite a proposed joint investigation by the US Embassy in Iraq and the Iraq Interior Ministry into the incident, it will be hard to get to the bottom of the matter in any definitive manner. Iraqi and US authorities will not be in a position to caution any of the individuals involved or to question them within the context of any legal framework. Neither will there be any radio log of voice or data traffic passed between the contractors during the incident – a vital component of any after-action investigation involving regular US military units. Nor will there be any legally identifiable chain of command for the Blackwater Security contractors that might clarify issues vital to the investigation such as

who was in command at the time of the incident and what rules of engagement were employed.

Blackwater was founded in the 1990's by an ex-US Navy Special Forces member, Erik Prince. Following intensive lobbying by the Alexander Strategy Group – some of whose directors are now under Federal investigation following the conviction of disgraced US lobbyist Jack Abramoff – former US Secretary for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld added Blackwater Security to the official strength of the US Department of Defence 'Total Force' in the Pentagon's 2006 Quadrennial Review. This put Blackwater on the payroll of the Bush Administration and led to the newly coined term 'Private Military Company' (PMC) to replace the term 'mercenary'.

Currently Blackwater has a permanent staff of around 3000 many of whom are former soldiers and police officers. Around 2000 Blackwater personnel are believed to be based in Iraq. It is difficult to know how many other mercenaries are sub-contracted to Blackwater and other US security contractors in Iraq. Their presence in Iraq however would appear to be quite significant. Recent figures show that US security contractors in Iraq have received funding of around 5 billion dollars over 2006 and 2007 – the same as the entire budget for UN international peacekeeping for the corresponding period. International military intelligence estimates of the numbers of mercenaries in Iraq point to a figure in the order of around 60,000.

Some of these security contractors are Irish – ex-members of the Irish Defence Forces and British Army. Irish army personnel are highly prized by PMCs operating in Iraq. This is due primarily to the fact that Irish soldiers speak English – which enables them to follow US military briefings and transmit orders appropriately and accurately. Irish soldiers are also able to monitor US military tactical radio nets and react appropriately to 'contact reports' (centrally collated data on insurgent locations – constantly logged and updated) and operational orders. They are also trained in the standard NATO tactics and fire control procedures of the US troops they often work alongside in Iraq. However, the majority of their peers operating on the ground in Iraq are former conscripts from central Europe, Asia and Latin America with little training and poor language skills.

One security contractor, a retired Irish army officer recently returned from Iraq informed the Irish Times that many security contractors operating there are 'has-beens or wannabes'. According to him 'most of the American guys are middle aged ex-military who are trying to escape alimony or child support payments in the States and who see Iraq as a way of earning good money quickly and far from the prying eyes of the US welfare system or the Internal Revenue Service. The rest are usually young guys, Poles, Ukrainians, Filipinos or Nepalese. Mostly conscripts with very poor military training'.

Other former Irish army personnel recently returned from Iraq paint an alarming picture of the modus operandi and terms and conditions offered by US and British PMCs in Iraq. According to these sources, Irish, British and American citizens usually gravitate towards leadership positions within the security contracting industry in Iraq – organising convoys and overseeing static guards on vital installations. Some are also assigned to VIP

protection duties depending on their military experience, rank and security clearance. In this way, Irish, British and American security contractors can earn between 300 and 1000 Euro per day in Iraq.

The vast majority however earn far less, with former conscripts from central Europe often earning as little as 100 Euro per week and engaged in low grade and hazardous security duties such as static guards at reconstruction projects far outside the Green Zone. Many work as poorly armed escorts on low-status convoys, accompanying Iraqi workers and supplies on high-risk journeys through restive Sunni and Shia districts. Most of these lower paid mercenaries are ill equipped, lacking basic body armour, travelling in soft-skinned vehicles and SUVs and most crucially – not issued with radio or communications equipment linked into US tactical nets.

These poorly trained, poorly equipped and poorly paid ex-conscripts it would appear form the backbone of a vast invisible army of mercenaries deployed in Iraq to support the US military machine there. Consistent with the doctrine of Donald Rumsfeld's 'Logistics Civil Assistance Programme' (LOGCAP), their presence is soldiering on the cheap with the added benefit that most of the eight thousand or so security contractors killed and injured in Iraq go home to Poland, the Ukraine, Nepal – or indeed Ireland – with no impact on US public opinion.

Senior US commanders in Iraq such as General George Casey have expressed disquiet about the 'Rent an Army' that currently exists in Iraq. The continued existence in Iraq of PMCs that are accountable to no-one represents the world's largest army of de-facto mercenaries operating as a law unto themselves. Whilst this situation persists, incidents like that which occurred in downtown Baghdad last Sunday will continue to occur and the west and its military will continue to be brought into disrepute – by the actions of the most mercenary in society – throughout the Middle East and beyond.

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