

Mercenaries in Iraq? Yes. Ours.

A **Mercenary** is a person who takes part in an armed conflict who is not a national of a Party to the conflict and "is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party". **Soldier of Fortune** is another term for a mercenary. *Source: Wikipedia*

While I usually avoid using material produced by others, the story of what is going on in Iraq with "private security firms" or "private armies" needs firsthand witnesses that I cannot provide. So this story borrows extensively from writings on the internet of investigative reporters for various U.S. and British publications and from Senate testimony of the same.

In recent days, it has been brought to public attention that a private security company (PSC), Blackwater USA, provides protection for American diplomats and others in Iraq and mercenaries of their firm are now accused of both killing innocent Iraqis and of selling arms to a banned terrorist group in Kurdistan. The North Carolina-based company, with an estimated 1,000 employees in Iraq, protects virtually every senior American diplomat and civilian official in Iraq.

There are more than 50 foreign security companies licensed to operate in Iraq. The military says there are 25,000 private security contractors operating in Iraq with up to 200 of them killed in the conflict. The House Government Affairs Committee estimates \$4 billion has been spent employing these security firms.

From the Bush administration's point of view at least, outsourcing the war to PSCs saves the army a division of troops and probably keeps down the number of Army body bags going home.

But not all American military officers in Iraq favor the use of uncontrolled private soldiers of fortune in Iraq. Those who serve in this capacity do not like to be referred to as mercenaries or soldiers of fortune - but they are. An American officer who deplores the fact that his country has allowed foreign civilians who are not subject to American or Iraqi law to carry weapons in Iraq said, "These guys run loose in this country and do stupid stuff. There's no authority over them, so you can't come down on them hard when they escalate force."

These hired guns, "easily distinguishable by their swept back sunglasses, muscled and tattooed bodies, operate like a shadow army. They live in barracks. They eat in mess halls. But they do not come under control of the US military. The conduct of these private forces sends a clear message to the Iraqi people: American lives are worth infinitely more than theirs, even if their only crime is driving their vehicle in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Blackwater and other private security firms long have been fixtures in Iraq, guarding U.S. officials and an international work force helping to rebuild the war-torn country.

A small American force quickly overwhelmed the Iraqi army and captured Baghdad. But the 140,000 uniformed American troops who remain behind have proved insufficient and inadequate to deal with the explosive complexity of the post-invasion period. The Americans have found using PSCs is convenient, affordable and apparently effective.

In May of 2004, a British PSC, Aegis, was awarded a \$293 million Pentagon contract which runs through 2007. Blackwater USA was first awarded a \$27 million no-bid contract during the early days of the occupation - to guard Ambassador Paul Bremer.

There have been complaints that security companies are poaching highly trained American and British special-forces soldiers with these huge salaries. The Pentagon has responded by offering \$150,000 cash bonuses for special-forces soldiers to re-enlist. Despite the high risks, the PSC mercenaries are in a very privileged and special position. One big advantage they have over the uniformed soldiers in the British or American forces in Iraq is that they are paid a fortune - easily more than \$1,000 a day. \$1,000 a day!

Accusations against Blackwater USA and their private army go nowhere. Neither the Iraqis or US occupation forces have control over their behavior.

The recent shootings allegedly done by Blackwater USA mercenaries sparked outrage across the country and spurred the strongest effort yet by Iraq's government to assert control over the tens of thousands of security contractors who operate without regulation and sometimes with impunity in the country. They have been shielded for years from Iraqi laws by a regulation written by U.S. occupation authorities before the nation's post-invasion government was formed.

But Iraqi government representatives also said they probably would not rescind Order No. 17, which was issued more than three years ago by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority. The order gives American security companies immunity from Iraqi prosecution on issues arising from their contracts.

"This is about a system of unaccountable and out of control private forces that have turned Iraq into a wild west from the very beginning of the occupation, often with the stamp of legitimacy of the US government," said a general.

"They have acted like cowboys, running Iraqis off the road, firing indiscriminately at vehicles and, in some cases, private forces have appeared on tape seemingly using Iraqis for target practice."

Some in the military fear that the PSCs conduct generates revenge killings and attacks against American military because the source of the initial attack is mistakenly believed to be the Americans.

"We see the security firms ... doing whatever they want in the streets. They beat citizens and scorn them," a Baghdad resident told AP Television News. "If such a thing happened in America or Britain, would the American president or American citizens accept it?"

To bolster their case against Blackwater, Interior Ministry officials included six other incidents in their preliminary report, an official said. The government had videotapes of some attacks, license plate numbers of Blackwater vehicles involved and eyewitness accounts implicating Blackwater, he said.

Bassam Ridha, a senior adviser to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, conceded that the Iraqi government, at least for now, cannot follow through on a ban on Blackwater, even though the firm has been operating without a license for more than a year. Two other firms that operate in Iraq - both of which are headquartered in the Washington, D.C., suburbs - are Dyncorp, based in Falls Church, Va., and Triple Canopy, based in Herndon, Va. Neither has the resources of Blackwater, which includes a fleet of helicopters that provide added security for State Department personnel traveling through Baghdad's dangerous streets.

The truth is that the US can no longer manage a war like Iraq without private contractors. Its military has shrunk from 2,100,000 to 1,400,000 since the end of the cold war, creating a severe shortage of manpower in wartime.

Whereas in the first Gulf war there was one private contractor serving on the ground for every 50 American soldiers, it is estimated that there is now one contractor for fewer than 10 servicemen.

The American government is hiring private security firms to stabilize Iraq — and paying them a fortune to do it. But many of them are unregulated and operate outside the law. Nearly a year after a law was passed holding contracted employees to the same code of justice as military personnel, the Bush administration has not published guidance on how military lawyers should do that, according to Peter Singer, a security industry expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

It is reported that no place in Baghdad is safe, including the Green Zone, a four-square-mile of heavily fortified former villas and palaces of Saddam Hussein. It has become kind of a prison where the concrete walls and checkpoints protect but isolate the Americans from the very people they say they have liberated and are trying to befriend and protect. No sensible American strays outside its walls without armed bodyguards. Not even John McCain in his televised walk.

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