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Private security companies: The fat cats of war

Few people have heard of

USPI United States which employs 3,600 people in Afghanistan, Olive UK which operates in 30 countries, or Blackwater USA – the biggest private army in Iraq². These mercenaries, euphemistically called ‘private security contractors’, are shadow armies that provide security for diplomats and contractors who work to rebuild (or profit from) war-torn countries.

Blackwater USA is one of many private security firms engaged by the State Department to protect its personnel in Iraq. A member of the Iraqi Group for Human Rights, an NGO in Baghdad, reported that Blackwater convoys, usually comprising several large, white SUVs, have proven deadly for Iraqi civilians since the early months of the occupation in March 2003³. ‘It is all about business and money making. Top corporate officials, like the CEO of Blackwater, Erik Prince, are making billions of dollars out of security contracts in Iraq, and they would not give it up for the world’⁴.

Documents show that Blackwater has been contracted for some 750 million dollars in private armed security services for the U.S. State

Department.⁵ Many U.S. and Iraqi officials and industry representatives believe Blackwater is untouchable, protected by State Department officials who defend the company at every turn. Further, private security companies have not been subject to the military’s restrictions on the use of offensive weapons, and there is a largely dysfunctional regulatory system intended to govern tens of thousands of hired guns operating in Iraq.

Lack of Accountability

Blackwater has received \$678 million in State Department contracts since 2003. Use of private security companies increased following the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, and U.S. authorities have no idea how many hired guns operate in the country; estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000 or higher. As a matter of justice, we should all hope that the Blackwater employees are held accountable for their actions.⁶

Although labeled a private security firm, Blackwater is in reality a paramilitary organisation which engages in combat operations for money. It is not subject to military law, and does not have to report its movements to the American military.⁷ In fact the military, which had been unaware that Blackwater was operating in Fallujah, created the Reconstruction Operations Center to track thousands of armed civilians on the battlefield. But Blackwater does not participate.



In 2004 the now-defunct U.S. occupation government called the Coalition Provisional Authority granted contractors immunity from the Iraqi legal process. Unlike soldiers, they can’t be court-martialed; unlike civilians, they can’t be prosecuted under the laws of the land. Sadly, as the investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill has testified for US senators, ‘impunity and immunity have gone hand in hand!’⁸

Tactics

In May 2007 an Iraqi civilian was shot dead by a Blackwater guard for driving too close to a security convoy. Later in September 2007, Blackwater guards, for no clear reason, opened fire at a traffic roundabout killing 17 Iraqis.⁹ Warnings to the local inhabitants are meaningless when written in a language the locals do not understand, and Blackwater always justifies the actions of their employees.

What kind of world is it

where a man can shoot women and children at random, and know that he will not be brought to justice; where morality is null and void and arbitrary killing the rule?¹

There is concern that the wanton aggression of private security companies is violating international treaties. The Geneva Convention has clearly designated what are lawful and unlawful combatants.

*International humanitarian law permits members of the armed forces of a State party to an international armed conflict and associated militias who fulfill the requisite criteria to directly engage in hostilities. They are generally considered lawful, or privileged, combatants who may not be prosecuted for the taking part in hostilities as long as they respect international humanitarian law. Upon capture they are entitled to prisoner of war status. If civilians directly engage in hostilities, they are considered "unlawful" or "unprivileged" combatants or belligerents (the treaties of humanitarian law do not expressly contain these terms). They may be prosecuted under the domestic law of the detaining state for such action.*¹⁰

The allegations against Blackwater and other military contractor companies relates to the use of offensive force which has already resulted in many civilian deaths.¹¹ Guards flagrantly killing civilians, when they are only permitted to use defensive force, are violating the law of war.¹² Increasingly, contractors have been drawn into operations where it is hard to determine the line between defensive and offensive force.¹³

Unlike America's previous conflicts, contractors have become integral to the U.S. effort in Iraq. Most Americans would be surprised to learn that there are at least 180,000 in Iraq at the moment operating as a private shadow army supporting, fighting and dying alongside the troops.¹⁴ They actually outnumber the 169,000 U.S. troops there. Britain pays for another 20,000. At least half are armed fighters, the rest provide support for personnel and technicians. Without them, the U.S. and Britain could not maintain their

occupation of Iraq¹⁵.

This unprecedented use of mercenaries has masked the depths of U.S. involvement in Iraq and clearly shows how little the occupying forces can rely on the locals, whom they supposedly 'liberated'. It has also allowed the U.S. to sustain an imperial war that could never have been waged with conscripted American soldiers, as Vietnam showed.¹⁶

Costs

Though the human cost is never publicly reported, the material cost is also unclear. Payments for contractors amount to tens of billions of dollars. Americans would also be shocked to hear that more than 1000 contractors have been killed and over 13,000 injured because these figures are not included in official casualty numbers. No one knows exactly how many are engaged in combat and how many in support services.¹⁷

Blackwater United States costs the American taxpayer approximately \$250,000 for each employee.¹⁸ The journalist Daniel Baer has appropriately commented that 'American soldiers in Iraq should fight because the cause is right, not because the price is right'. He finds it more troubling than the hidden costs is the way the money involved is used to undermine the volunteer fighting force.¹⁹ Governments have also used contractors to covertly put more troops on the ground – and if they are not motivated by the cause, they might be motivated by the dollar. Security personnel earn princely salaries many times more than what a soldier earns. Using private security contractors also means that there is no need to face the hard slog of convincing Congress and the public to authorize sending more soldiers. Additional 'soldiers' are brought in on the sly.²⁰

Bush administration officials are adamant that Blackwater and other contractors are needed because they do

not have adequate military capacity to execute the functions that contractors currently carry out. This means that the USA, with the most advanced military on earth, does not have the 'know-how' to execute these tasks or to train people to do them. It means that they do not have the manpower to do them because not enough volunteers have come forward to join the military or the Bush administration knows that the public would not countenance more troops being sent into war.²¹

This should not distract us from the fact that by using Blackwater and other such companies the US and other governments are guilty of egregious economic conscription, of purposefully using the size of the purse rather than the justice of the cause to entice soldiers. Clearly, the wrong is amplified by the fact that in the process an unjustified inequity is created between Blackwater personnel and US military soldiers who get less pay.²²

The use of private military contractors needs to be re-evaluated, especially when use in armed roles. The re-evaluation needs to determine what roles are appropriate for private companies and what is necessary in public service, especially armed roles within counterinsurgency and contingency operations. More and more roles are being outsourced which has consequences for the overall mission²³.

Military outsourcing has become an addiction. Many have vested interests in the system. The private and public leaders concerned will try to convince the people to ignore incidents as random shootings as attributable to rogue elements, but there is no other choice than to employ these companies. 'These are the denials of pushers, enablers, and addicts. Only an open and honest intervention, a step back from the precipice of over-outsourcing, can break us out of the vicious cycle into which we have locked our national security.'²⁴

Full references on the ERC website.



Edmund Rice Centre
AWARENESS • ADVOCACY • ACTION

9 Alexandra Ave, Croydon 2132
Phone (02) 9745 9700
Fax (02) 9745 9770
Email zeena@erc.org.au
Web www.erc.org.au



179 Albert Rd, Strathfield 2135
Phone (02) 9739 2100
Fax (02) 02 9739 2105

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