

Garda: Canada's "Blackwater". The World's Largest Privately held Security Firm

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Last week students at L'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) disrupted a board meeting after learning administrators planned to sign a \$50 million, seven-year, contract with security giant GardaWorld. Protesters are angry the administration has sought to expel student leaders and ramp up security at the politically active campus as they cut programs.

The world's largest privately held security firm, Garda is open about its need for repressive university, business and political leaders. The Montréal firm's chief executive, Stephan Cretier, called the 2012 Québec student strike "positive" for business. "Naturally, when there's unrest somewhere - the Egyptian election or some disruption here in Quebec or a labour disruption somewhere - unfortunately it's usually good for business."

But, that's not half of it. A 2014 Canadian Business profile described Garda's business as "[renting out bands](#) of armed men to protect clients working in some of the Earth's most dangerous outposts." Garda operates in Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Algeria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya and elsewhere.

Established in 1995, the early 2000s invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan propelled Garda's international growth. With financing from Québec's Caisse de dépôt pension fund, by 2007 they had as many as [5,000 employees](#) in the region.

While US militarism boosts its profits, the company has deflected criticism with a noble Canadian shield. When four Garda employees were kidnapped (and later killed) in 2007, the head of the company claimed its private soldiers in Iraq were "[perceived differently](#) because we're Canadian." Of course, he didn't mention if Iraqis shot by unaccountable mercenaries feel that way on discovering the bullets were fired by an employee of a Canadian firm.

Garda has been engulfed in controversy in Afghanistan as well. In 2012 two of its British employees were caught with [dozens of unlicensed](#) AK-47 rifles and jailed for three months while two years later the head of Garda's Afghan operations, Daniel Ménard, was jailed for three weeks on similar charges. Commander of Canadian Forces in Afghanistan in 2009-10, Ménard left the military after he was court-martialed for recklessly discharging his weapon and having sexual relations with a subordinate.

In 2013 Garda established operations in Nigeria to provide "logistical support" for international oil firms, which have faced political and criminal attacks. That year Garda also [rented a villa](#) in Mogadishu, Somalia, to lodge energy contractors and international development workers as well as accompany them around the country. A 2014 report from the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries questioned the growing role of Western

security companies in the country. As Somalia “[rebuilds](#)” its security institutions, the Government should ensure that private security forces are properly regulated and do not become a substitute for competent and accountable police. All Somalis have the right to security, not just those who can afford to pay for it,” said Faiza Patel, chairperson of the UN Working Group.

But it’s not simply a matter of equal justice. In a country where control of armed men has long been the main source of power, private security companies can easily strengthen the hand of a political faction or prolong conflict.

Garda’s most successful foray abroad is in Libya where it appointed former Canadian Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew Zdunich head of its operations. Sometime in the “summer of 2011”, according to its website, Garda began operating in the country. After Libya’s National Transition Council captured Tripoli (six weeks before Muammar Gaddafi was killed in Sirte on October 20, 2011) the rebels requested Garda’s assistance in bringing their forces “[besieging the](#)” pro-Qaddafi stronghold of Sirte to hospitals in Misrata”, reported *Bloomberg*. Garda’s involvement in Libya may have contravened that country’s laws as well as UN resolutions 1970 and 1973, which the Security Council passed amidst the uprising against Gaddafi’s four-decade rule.

Resolution 1970 called for an arms embargo, mandating all UN member states “to prevent the provision of armed mercenary personnel” into Libya. Resolution 1973 reinforced the arms embargo, mentioning “armed mercenary personnel” in three different contexts. In an article titled “Mercenaries in Libya: Ramifications of the Treatment of ‘Armed Mercenary Personnel’ under the Arms Embargo for Private Military Company Contractors”, Hin-Yan Liu points out that the Security Council’s “[explicit use](#) of the broader term ‘armed mercenary personnel’ is likely to include a significant category of contractors working for Private Military Companies (PMCs).”

Contravening international law can be good for business. As the first Western security company officially operating in the country, Garda’s website described it as the “market leader in Libya” with “[over 3,500](#)” staff providing protection, training and crisis response.” Garda’s small army of former British special forces and other elite soldiers won a slew of lucrative contracts in Libya. The company’s Protective Security Detail provided “security for a number of international oil companies and their service providers” as well as NATO soldiers training the Libyan Army (the first time NATO contracted out the protection of a training program).

The Montréal company also protected a hundred European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) personnel who trained and equipped Libyan border and coast guards in a bid to curtail African migrants from crossing the Mediterranean. Garda’s four-year EUBAM contract garnered attention in early 2014 when 19 cases of arms and ammunition destined for the company disappeared at the Tripoli airport. But the company didn’t let this loss of weapons deter it from performing its duties. According to *Intelligence Online*, company officials asked “[to borrow](#)” British weapons to ensure the safety of EU personnel.”

The request found favour since Garda already protected British interests in Libya, including Ambassador Dominic Asquith. In *Under Fire: The Untold Story of the Attack in Benghazi*, Fred Burton and Samuel M. Katz describe the ambassador’s protection detail: “[Some members](#) of Sir Dominic Asquith’s security detail were undoubtedly veterans of 22 Special

Air Service, or SAS, Great Britain's legendary commandos, whose motto is 'Who Dares Wins.' Others were members of the Royal Marines Special Boat Service, or SBS."

In June 2012 a rebel group attacked Asquith's convoy in Benghazi with a rocket-propelled grenade. "The RPG-7 warhead fell short of the ambassador's vehicle", notes *Under Fire*. Two Garda operatives "were seriously hurt by fragmentation when the blast and rocket punched out the windshield of the lead vehicle; their blood splattered throughout the vehicle's interior and then onto the street."

One wonders how many Libyans have fallen prey to "Canada's Blackwater"?

A source of employment for retired Canadian, British and US forces, Garda has built up its connections in military-political circles. A former Canadian ambassador to the US and Stephen Harper advisor, Derek Burney, is chair of its International Advisory Board. Garda's board also includes retired four-star US *Admiral Eric T. Olson*, Deputy Secretary of the US Department of Homeland Security Michael P. Jackson and UK Permanent Secretary, Intelligence, Security and Resilience in the Cabinet Office Sir Richard Mottram. In December Garda hired recently retired Conservative minister Christian Paradis, reported *Le Soleil*, to "[convince different](#) levels of government to increase their use of the private sector in public safety."A

A creature of neoliberal capitalism and Western aggression, Garda is a danger to democracy.

Yves Engler is the author of [Canada in Africa: 300 years of aid and exploitation](#). [Read other articles by Yves](#).

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