

The Rise of Mercenary Armies: A Threat to Global Security

Help White House Thwart Peace Movement

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The growing use of private armies not only subjects target populations to savage warfare but makes it easier for the White House to subvert domestic public opinion and wage wars.

Americans are less inclined to oppose a war that is being fought by hired foreign mercenaries, even when their own tax dollars are being squandered to fund it.

“The increasing use of contractors, private forces, or, as some would say, ‘mercenaries’ makes wars easier to begin and to fight—it just takes money and not the citizenry,” said Michael Ratner, of New York’s Center for Constitutional Rights. “To the extent a population is called upon to go to war, there is resistance, a necessary resistance to prevent wars of self-aggrandizement, foolish wars, and, in the case of the United States, hegemonic imperialist wars.”

Indeed, the Pentagon learned the perils of the draft from the massive public protests it provoked during the Viet Nam war. Today, it would prefer, and is working toward, an electronic battlefield where the fighting is done by robots guided by sophisticated surveillance systems that will minimize U.S. casualties. Meanwhile, it tolerates the use of private contractors to help fight its battles.

Iraq offers a heart-breaking example of a war in which contract fighters so inflamed the public they were sent to “liberate” that when fighting broke out in Fallujah the bodies of privateer Blackwater’s four slain mercenaries were desecrated by enraged mobs. This horrific scene was televised globally and prompted the U.S. to make a punishing, retaliatory military assault upon Fallujah, causing widespread death and destruction.

Just as the American colonists despised the mercenary Hessians in the Revolutionary War, Iraqis came to hate Blackwater and its kindred contractors worse than U.S. soldiers, who often showed them kindness, according to a journalist with experience in the war zone.

“It wasn’t uncommon for an American soldier, or even an entire company, to develop a very friendly relationship with an Iraqi community. It didn’t happen every day, but it wasn’t unheard of,” writes Ahmed Mansour, an Egyptian reporter and talk show host for Qatar-based al-Jazeera, the Middle East TV network.

“It was also definitely not uncommon to see American troops high-fiving Iraqi teenagers, holding the arm of an elderly woman to help her cross a street, or helping someone out of a difficult situation...This was not the case with mercenaries. They knew they were viewed as

evil thugs, and they wanted to keep it that way.”

In his book “Inside Fallujah”(Olive Branch Press), Mansour says, “Mercenaries were viewed as monsters, primarily because they behaved monstrously. They never spoke to anyone using words—they only used the language of fire, bullets, and absolute lethal force. It was fairly common to see a mercenary crush a small civilian Iraqi car with passengers inside just because the mercenaries happened to be stuck in a traffic jam.”

Mansour, best known as host of the talk show “Without Limits,” says his viewing audience was “outraged by the mere idea that a political superpower like the United States would hire mercenaries to do their unpleasant work instead of employing soldiers who believe in their country and its mission. Viewers were also obviously outraged over the horrendous war crimes committed by the mercenaries.”

Blackwater was finally censured after its forces mowed down 17 civilians on Sept. 16, 2007, in what Iraqi officials said was an unprovoked assault in Baghdad’s Nisour Square, after which they refused to renew its operating license. The Moyock, N.C.-based security outfit changed its name to Xe Services and, according to The Nation magazine, was still allowed to ink a \$20 million renewal pact good through Sept. 3rd, to guard State Department officials. Part of its work, though, has been assumed by Triple Canopy, of Herndon, Va., a firm also with a blemished history.

Triple Canopy employs “private security guards (who) have allegedly targeted Iraqi civilians for sport, attempting to kill them, while doing work for Halliburton/KBR,” claims Pratap Chatterjee in his book, “Halliburton’s Army”(Nation Books). Speaking of mercenaries as a group, Brig. General Karl Hors, an advisor to the U.S. Joint Force Command, once observed, “These guys run loose in this country and do stupid stuff. There is no authority over them, so you can’t come down on them when they escalate in force. They shoot people and someone else has to deal with the aftermath. It happens all over the place.”

On June 27, 2004, the day before L. Paul Bremer III, the administrator of the Coalition Provisional authority, left Baghdad, he issued Order 17 that barred the Iraqi government from prosecuting contractor crimes in domestic courts. Result: When the Iraq government probed Nisour Square, it reported “the murder of citizens in cold blood in the Nisour area by Blackwater is considered a terrorist action against civilians just like any other terrorist operation.” As the Associated Press reported last April 1, “The company does not face any charges. But the Baghdad incident exacerbated the feelings of many Iraqis that private American security contractors have operated since 2003 with little regard for Iraqi law or life.” Baghdad also charged Blackwater was involved in at least six deadly incidents in the year leading up to Nisour Square, including the death of Iraqi journalist Hana al-Ameedi.

By Spring, 2008, there were 180,000 mercenaries operating in Iraq. How many of them have been killed is not known. Their deaths do not appear on Pentagon casualty lists. Since many perform non-combat duties, it is not likely they have suffered as many deaths and wounds as GI’s. By some estimates, perhaps 1,000 perished in Iraq, about one mercenary for every four GI’s killed.

According to Mansour, an Iraqi group, Supporters of Truth, claims that low-flying U.S. helicopters dropped the bodies of slain mercenaries into the Diyala River near the Iranian border. Another group, the Islamic Army of Iraq, “uncovered mass graves for mercenaries

who worked for the U.S. forces....He said uncovering mass graves of mercenaries had become common in Iraq..." Whether these were local mercenaries or imported fighters was not clear.

Many soldiers of fortune on private payrolls previously served dictators in South Africa, Chile, and elsewhere. "In Iraq, the private security firms that are the second-large component of the 'coalition of the willing' are dipping into experienced pools of trained fighters, almost 70 percent from El Salvador, it is estimated, Noam Chomsky writes in "Failed States"(Metropolitan/Owl). "The trained killers from the Reagan-run state terrorist apparatus can earn better pay pursuing their craft in Iraq than in what remains of their societies at home."

Other mercenaries have been recruited from the Iraqi population itself. Sociologist James Petras, in his "Rulers and Ruled in the U.S. Empire,"(Clarity Press) writes, "The use of local mercenaries creates the illusion that Washington is gradually handing over power to the local puppet regime. It gives the impression that the puppet regime is capable of ruling, and propagandizes the myth that a stable and reliable locally-based army exists. The presence of these local mercenaries creates the myth that the internal conflict is a civil war instead of a national liberation struggle against a colonial power."

Petras also writes, "the failure of the US policy of using Iraqi mercenaries to defeat the resistance is evident in the escalation of US combat military forces in Iraq in the spring of 2007, after five years of colonial warfare—from 140,000 to 170,000 troops, not counting the presence of some 100,000 mercenaries from American firms such as Blackwater." He said the Iraqi mercenary force is plagued by high levels of desertion.

In "The Sorrows of Empire"(Metropolitan/Owl), Chalmers Johnson wrote, "The use of private contractors is assumed to be more cost-effective, but even that is open to question when contracts go only to a few well-connected companies and the bidding is not particularly competitive." Blackwater Security got a \$27 million no-bid contract to guard L. Paul Bremer III, the administrator of the Coalition Provisional authority in 2003. According to Joseph Stiglitz in "The Three Trillion Dollar War" (W.W. Norton), that was expanded to \$100 million a year later and by 2007, Blackwater held a \$1.2 billion contract for Iraq, where it employed 845 private security contractors.

Stiglitz notes that in 2007 private security guards working for firms like Blackwater and Dyncorp were earning up to \$1,222 a day or \$445,000 a year. By contrast, an Army sergeant earned \$140 to \$190 a day in pay and benefits, a total of \$51,100 to \$69,350 a year.

Since U.S. taxpayers are underwriting private soldiers' paychecks, where's the savings? It is money from taxpayer's pockets that has made these shadow armies great.

In his bestseller "Blackwater: The Rise of The World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army(Nation Books) reporter Jeremy Scahill writes: "Its seven-thousand-acre facility in Moyock, N.C., has now become the most sophisticated private military center on the planet, while the company possesses one of the world's largest privately held stockpiles of heavy-duty weaponry. It is a major training center for federal and local security and military forces in the United States, as well as foreign forces and private individuals....It is developing surveillance blimps and private airstrips for its fleet of aircraft, which include helicopter gunships." Company officials say they have been training about 35,000 "law enforcement"

and military personnel a year.

The idea of the Pentagon outsourcing much of its work, from kitchen police to war zone truck drivers, came largely from then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney in the early 1990s, when he was tasked by Congress to reduce Pentagon spending after the Cold War thawed. And after leaving his Defense post to become CEO of Halliburton, Cheney also oversaw the use of contractors to support the military then engaged in the former Yugoslavia. As Pratap Chatterjee reminds in "Halliburton's Army" (Nation Books), "Approximately one in one hundred people on the Iraqi battlefield in the 2001 (sic 1991) Operation Desert Storm were contractors, compared to today in Operation Enduring Freedom, where the number of contractors are roughly equal to those of military personnel."

And since mercenaries can work in civvies, they are useful to the Pentagon when it seeks to build a military presence in a country without attracting undue attention. As Scahill writes, "Instead of sending in battalions of active U.S. military to Azerbaijan, the Pentagon deployed 'civilian contractors' from Blackwater and other firms to set up an operation that would serve a dual purpose: protecting the West's new profitable oil and gas exploitation in a region historically dominated by Russia and Iran, and possibly laying the groundwork for an important forward operating base for an attack against Iran."

Scahill says "Domestic opposition to wars of aggression results in fewer people volunteering to serve in the armed forces, which historically deflates the war drive or forces a military draft. At the same time, international opposition has made it harder for Washington to persuade other governments to support its wars and occupations. But with private mercenary companies, these dynamics change dramatically, as the pool of potential soldiers available to an aggressive administration is limited only by the number of men across the globe willing to kill for money. With the aid of mercenaries, you don't need a draft or even the support of your own public to wage wars of aggression, nor do you need a coalition of 'willing' nations to aid you. If Washington cannot staff an occupation or invasion with its national forces, the mercenary firms offer a privatized alternative—including Blackwater's 21,000-man contractor database....If foreign governments are not on board, foreign soldiers can still be bought."

In Jan., 2008, the UN working group on mercenaries found an emerging trend in Latin America of "situations of private security companies protecting transnational extractive corporations whose employees are often involved in suppressing the legitimate social protest of communities and human rights and environmental organizations of the areas where these corporations operate." And South Africa's Defense Minister Mosiuoa Lekota, termed mercenaries "the scourge of poor areas of the world, especially Africa. These are killers for hire. They rent out their skills to the highest bidder. Anybody that has money can hire these human beings and turn them into killing machines or cannon fodder."

Mincing no words, Ratner warns, "These kinds of military groups bring to mind Nazi Party brownshirts, functioning as an extrajudicial enforcement mechanism that can and does operate outside the law."

Of course, contract warrior firm officials see themselves in a nobler light. Blackwater's Vice-Chairman Cofer Black in one speech compared his company to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, asserting they "Focus on morals and ethics and integrity. This is important. We are not fly-by-night. We are not tricksters. We believe in these things." For all such claims, the final judgment on the performance of contract military firms must come from the people

these noble knights purport to serve. And if Blackwater is any example, they are hated.

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