

CIA death squads operating in Iraq

By Henry Michaels
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The longer the Iraq war continues, the more Orwellian the language and the more sinister the methods adopted by the Bush administration and its allies. While President Bush and his officials depict Iraqis resisting the US-led invasion as “terrorists” and “death squads,” CIA and Special Forces assassination squads are at work in Iraq, seeking to eliminate Iraqi leaders and other opponents of the US occupation of the country.

In the language of the White House and Pentagon, the thousands of Iraqi citizens in plainclothes—whether ordinary people, militia members or soldiers—who are resisting the invading forces in any way they can, are “war criminals.” But the undercover US hit squads and other military-intelligence operatives roaming throughout Iraq in civilian clothes, terrorizing the population, are “heroes” in the cause of democracy and liberation.

While the Western media has largely blacked coverage of the US killers, one report in the Canadian *National Post* last week briefly mentioned the presence of special operations troops in civilian clothes as US Marines reached southern Baghdad. “Special forces were also out in large numbers in their distinctive fighting gear, which includes baseball caps, jeans, expensive sunglasses and specially adapted rifles,” it noted.

There is a fundamental difference between the Iraqis who are defending their country and the US, British and Australian special operations units that are operating secretly, often in civilian disguise. Whereas the Iraqis are legitimately targeting Allied military personnel for ambushes, sniper fire and surprise bombings, the US-led squads are illegally hunting down civilians and government figures, sabotaging civilian facilities and arming selected local thugs to execute reprisals, flouting the international laws of war.

In the face of widespread popular resistance, these “unconventional warfare” operations are escalating, but they have been under way for many months. Well before Bush formally declared war on Iraq, US intelligence and military operatives were in Baghdad and throughout Iraq, aiming to locate and kill Saddam Hussein and other leaders. British and Australian Special Air Services (SAS) commandos were

also active in the west and north of Iraq.

Citing intelligence sources, United Press International reported last week that the unsuccessful bombing operation to murder Saddam Hussein and his family and cabinet ministers on March 20 was preceded by intensive infiltration of CIA agents into Baghdad, the recruitment of Iraqi spies and the insertion of special operations troops into the capital.

According to UPI: “The March 20 operation involved more than 300 Special Forces, who moved into the country to join Delta troops and CIA paramilitaries, these sources said. One former long-time CIA operative said it was the Delta men, already in the country, who made the breakthrough for the US attack by infiltrating a key Baghdad telecommunications center and tapping a fiber optic telephone line.

“It was this that enabled the US clandestine team to locate Saddam and top leaders at Dora Farm, an Iraqi command and control complex and a legitimate war target, US officials said. Iraqi assets [spies], recruited by the agency, played a key part in the operation by providing ‘priceless’ information, relating to the phone system and details of Dora Farm, according to one former senior CIA official.”

Having failed to “decapitate” the Iraqi government, such operations nevertheless remain one of Washington’s top objectives. UPI reported: “CIA paramilitary teams, working with Delta Forces, still are inside Iraq, attempting to kill 30 top Iraqi leaders, including Saddam’s other son, Uday, who commands the Iraqi Fedayeen, several US sources said. One administration official confirmed that US intelligence has the names, addresses and cell phone numbers of the 30 targets.”

Last Wednesday, acting on CIA information, a helicopter formation raided the Tharthar Palace, one of many residences allegedly used by Hussein and his sons, about 55 miles outside Baghdad.

Reporting on the “unseen” war in Iraq conducted by teams of CIA paramilitary and Special Forces operatives, the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted retired US Brigadier General John Reppert: “That is certainly the strategy now. And decapitation as a strategy works well beyond Saddam Hussein. It takes in his Revolutionary Council, leaders of his

Baath Party, and below that, the four divisions of the Republican Guard plus the one Special Republican Guard unit.”

As these comments suggest, the special forces’ targets extend well beyond the Iraqi leadership. An on-the-spot-report from the city of Najaf published by the London-based *Financial Times* on April 5 provided a glimpse of the methods being employed in urban areas:

“The people of Najaf were introduced to their new government this week—a virtually unknown opposition group that claims to represent all Iraqis, cruises around the streets on US special forces vehicles, and is doing its best to present itself as part of a spontaneous ‘intifada’ against the Iraqi regime.”

Members of the group, called the Iraqi Coalition for National Unity (ICNU), “rarely stray from their US vehicles and special forces minders, grinning broadly for cameras from atop Humvees and raising their weapons in victory.... Co-ordination between ICNU and US ground forces in Najaf is tight, handled by special forces and CIA operatives.”

Nevertheless, the newspaper reported, the ICNU and its sponsors had failed to subdue the city, which hosts Shia Muslim holy sites. US troops patrolled during the day but withdrew at night, looting by hungry crowds was commonplace, and Shia religious leaders had refused to negotiate directly with US commanders, regarding them as an occupying force.

Elsewhere, including in the northern Kurdish areas, allied operatives are financing and arming tribal leaders, ethnic militias and local thugs, employing similar techniques to Afghanistan, where the CIA paid millions of dollars to regional warlords to fight against the Taliban regime. “I’m sure we’ve got guys with 80-pound rucksacks full of \$100 bills,” a former CIA station chief told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I’m sure we’re buying up some folks.”

Well before the war began, huge payments were channeled through networks of Iraqi agents recruited by the CIA and MI6, the British spy agency, to encourage uprisings against the Iraqi government. Up until now, however, these efforts have not borne fruit.

At an April 4 Pentagon media briefing, Army Major General Stanley McChrystal boasted that the contribution of special forces to the US operation had been “unprecedented.” Another senior official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said more than 10,000 special operations troops were involved in Iraq—the largest number for any US war since Vietnam.

There was a revealing exchange when a journalist asked the following question:

“Can you help us to understand one of the points—one of the arguments made by the administration on the ‘war

criminals’ tag? Obviously, the administration has seen a number of irregular practices on the part of the Iraqis. One of them in particular puzzles me. When they take off their uniforms and fight in civilian clothes, why is that a war crime? Because US Special Forces do it and did it in Afghanistan—they didn’t behave in the same way, but why is the act of fighting without a uniform considered a war crime?”

McChrystal could not answer the question, becoming flummoxed as he tried unsuccessfully to draw a distinction between the tasks being performed by US personnel and Iraqi civilians. Victoria Clarke, spokeswoman for Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, quickly stepped in to shut down the line of questioning.

“I’d actually like to take that question, because I don’t think you’re right about that,” she told the journalist. After a pause, Clarke said the Pentagon would respond later.

Another journalist asked if US forces were under any “special instructions” if they found Saddam Hussein or other senior Iraqi leader. Clarke immediately told McChrystal, “You don’t need to answer his question.”

After the press conference, officials said US special forces in Iraq “are wearing uniforms,” but declined to say if they were full uniforms or modified. Clarke’s abrupt intervention at the briefing suggests acute awareness in the administration that its officials and military commanders are the ones committing war crimes in Iraq.

The methods being used in Iraq will soon become as notorious as the CIA-backed coup in Iran in 1953 to install the cruel regime of the Shah, the “Operation Phoenix” killing program in Vietnam, and the 1973 overthrow of the Allende government in Chile, to name but a few of US imperialism’s crimes.

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