

What was the British SAS doing in Basra?

By Chris Marsden
28 September 2005

The September 19 arrest of two undercover Special Air Service officers in Basra, traveling in an unmarked car containing weapons and explosives, has led to numerous accusations that they were acting as agents provocateurs.

The BBC reported that the SAS men's car contained "weapons, explosives and communications gear," before claiming that these were "standard kit for British special forces."

But in a September 27 article, one of the more serious reporters on the Middle East, Robert Fisk, wrote in the *Independent*, "Remember how we were told that our immense experience of 'peace-keeping' in Northern Ireland had allowed us to get on better with the Iraqis in the south than our American cousins further north?"

Replying to his own question, he wrote, "I don't actually remember us doing much 'peacekeeping' in Belfast after about 1969—the rest, I recall, was about biffing the IRA—but in any case the myth was burned out on the uniforms of British troops this week.

"Indeed, much of the war in Northern Ireland appeared to revolve around the use of covert killings and SAS undercover operatives who blew away IRA men in ambushes."

After making this correct observation of how British imperialism stirred up sectarian tensions and carried out political assassinations in order to preserve its rule over its oldest colonial possession, Fisk continues, "Which does raise the question, doesn't it, as to just what our two SAS lads were doing cruising around Basra in Arab dress with itchy-bitsy moustaches and guns? Why did no one ask? How many SAS men are in southern Iraq? Why are they there? What are their duties? What weapons do they carry? Whoops! No one asked."

Fisk does not say directly what he believes the SAS was up to. However, in the Arab media the accusations of the Mehdi army led by Moqtada al-Sadr and others that the two officers were acting as provocateurs are discussed openly.

Al Jazeera quoted Sheik Hassan al-Zarqani, spokesman for the Mehdi army, stating, "What our police found in

their car was very disturbing—weapons, explosives, and a remote control detonator. These are the weapons of terrorists. We believe these soldiers were planning an attack on a market or other civilian targets."

The news agency continues, "What needs to be given more attention in the wake of recent clashes that broke out in Basra following the arrest of two British soldiers last week is whether those commandos were planning an attack or not, whether their car did have explosives or not. The answer to this question is crucial for the future of Iraq and Bush's so-called 'war on terror.'

"If allegations that the soldiers' car was loaded with explosives were proved, this will strengthen the theory suggesting that the British and American intelligence is involved in the persistent and violent acts of 'terror' spreading across Iraq, which means that the current 'counterinsurgency' efforts involve the premeditated killing of innocent civilians to achieve the US policy objectives. Isn't this the very definition of terrorism?"

Regarding the issue of explosives, as well as citing the report by the BBC's Paul Wood, Al Jazeera also notes a report by the Chinese news service Xinhuanet stating that the SAS "soldiers were using a civilian car packed with explosives."

It also cites a report by Jonathan Finer of the *Washington Post's* foreign office, stating, "Monday's clashes stemmed from the arrest by Iraqi police on Sunday of two Britons, whom Iraqi police accused of planting bombs."

Amongst a number of reports from Syrian and Turkish news sources, it singles out a Syrian correspondent in Baghdad, Ziyad al-Munajjid. He writes: "Many analysts and observers here had suspicions that the occupation was involved in some armed operations against civilians and places of worship and in the killing of scientists. But those were only suspicions that lacked proof. The proof came today through the arrest of the two British soldiers while they were planting explosives in one of the Basra streets.

"This proves, according to observers, that the

occupation is not far from many operations that seek to sow sedition and maintain disorder, as this would give the occupation the justification to stay in Iraq for a longer period.”

Al Jazeera also quotes a report in Britain’s *Telegraph* citing Baghdad Muslim cleric Abdel al-Daraji’s statement that “Britain was plotting to start an ethnic war by carrying out mass-casualty bombings targeting Shiite civilians and then blaming the attacks on Sunni groups.

“Everyone knows the occupiers’ agenda. Their intention is to keep Iraq an unstable battlefield so they can exploit their interests in Iraq.”

The *Telegraph* article is in fact an attempt to refute such allegations as a “smear campaign” designed to “stoke growing anti-British sentiment in southern Iraq.” But the *Telegraph* offers no alternative explanation as to why the SAS would be carrying substantial quantities of explosives and makes no attempt to deny such reports.

Similarly the BBC’s claim that high explosives are standard issue for the SAS raises more questions than it provides answers.

Why would explosives be required for any other type of undercover operation than the manufacture and planting of bombs?

The only alternative explanation so far advanced was in the pages of the *Sunday Times*, which wrote a number of related articles claiming that the SAS was involved in an extensive counterinsurgency operation targeting Iranian-backed militias.

The two officers were “engaged in a ‘secret war’ against insurgents bringing sophisticated bombs into the country from Iran.” The *Times* cited “a source with knowledge of their activities,” claiming that the captured patrol was bringing “more tools and fire power” to a second patrol.

The *Times* cites another source stating that “a 24-strong SAS team has been working out of Basra to provide a safety net to stop the bombers getting into the city from Iran. The aim is to identify routes used by insurgents and either capture or kill them.”

There is clearly Iranian involvement in the Iraqi quagmire created by the United States’ and Britain’s illegal war of aggression. But again, why would an operation to prevent the movement of weapons across the Iraqi border involve explosives?

The account by the *Times* does not mention explosives, but does cite an Iraqi police officer, Khaled Abdul Baqi, stating that “equipment that resembled a large remote control of sorts” was found inside the SAS men’s car.

In any event, Britain’s semi-official denials count for very little in Basra. The response by the two undercover SAS officers to Iraqi police attempts to stop them at a checkpoint suggests that they had something sinister to hide. The two opened fire, reportedly killing a person and wounding several others, including police officers.

The official explanation is that the army is now instructed to treat the local police force as part of the insurgency, because it is so infiltrated by militia groups. This was also the army’s attitude when it mounted a rescue operation of the two officers from the local police facility. Some 10 armoured personnel vehicles and a helicopter were used to storm the building and attack around a thousand demonstrators, incensed by the discovery of the SAS’s activities. The British Army used live fire and baton rounds in its assault, killing several people and injuring many more.

In the immediate aftermath of September 19, British control of Basra is facing mounting popular opposition. There are widespread reports of demonstrations against the British. Local authorities have withdrawn cooperation with the occupation forces and the city’s anti-terrorist judge has issued an arrest warrant for the two SAS officers.

Britain has rejected the legality of the arrest warrant and refused a compensation demand for the victims of the assault on the police facility. Instead, Defence Minister John Reid has said he intends to scrap the 25,000-strong police force in southern Iraq and “replace it with a new military-style unit capable of maintaining law and order.”

Creating the conditions for such increased repression has always been an essential aim of the dirty tricks operations with which the SAS is associated.

To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>