

U.S. LED PRIVATIZED COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN CONFLICT ZONES: ONE MISTAKE FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER BLUNDER

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On 18th July 2010, in one of the deadliest single terrorist strikes in Iraq this year, nearly forty three persons were killed and many were left seriously injured. The prime target of the latest terror strike were the members of the so called ‘Sunni Awakening’ Movement, consisting of motley groups of Sunni tribesmen of Iraq who have been recruited and used by the US army and the Iraqi administration as vigilante groups to target the insurgency groups and *Al Qaeda* operatives within the country since 2006. Similar Shiite vigilante groups have also been propped up in Iraq primarily to target Shiite insurgency groups like the *Al Mahdi*. Though such terror strikes in conflict ridden Iraq and Afghanistan have almost become incidents of everyday occurrence, the recent attack signifies another ominous trend- the American efforts to extend their version of a privatized counterinsurgency war, oblivious to the associated dangers and long term implications in areas where such strategy is being implemented.

Counterinsurgency operations launched in Afghanistan and in Iraq, mainly under the US initiative since the 9/11 incident, have been privatized to an unprecedented extent. But until recently, the main private actors involved were the western dollar- rich Private Security Corporations (PSCs) who have been performing an extensive range of duties stretching from commissariat services to security related operations in the combat zones. In spite of criticism of numerous Democrats, there has not been any reduction in their usage under the Obama regime. On the contrary, a major US strategy now seems to set up numerous local vigilante groups in the conflict zones to target and cap insurgency activities.

Following the Anbar uprising, the US army command had initiated this policy of encouraging the formation of such groups. In Iraq, for instance, apart from the Sunni Awakening groups, several Concerned Citizens groups, consisting of both Shiites and Sunnis have been set up. Though the local officials deny that the US army has armed any of these vigilante groups, they nonetheless admit that most of these groups are already armed to the teeth. According to Captain Christian Cosner, the commander of Bravo Troop, 1st Battalion, 89th Regiment of the 2nd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division operating in *Al Haswa*, for instance, “We are not arming the Iraqi Provincial Volunteers. These guys have all the weapons they need; we’re just having them point in the right direction.”¹ Despite playing a

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Bill Roggio, ‘Standing Up the Concerned Citizens in Southern Baghdad’, *The Long War Journal*, September 15, 2007 (Source: http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2007/09/standing_up_the_conc.php) (accessed: 27/7/2010)

significant role in destroying or marginalizing *Al Qaeda* networks in many parts of central Iraq, the Sunni vigilante groups have always been viewed with suspicion by the Shiite-led government of Nouri al-Maliki. The Sunni militiamen also complain about the failure of the government to fulfil promises to integrate 20 percent of the roughly 92,000 Awakening members into the regular security forces and to find jobs for others.

Following their so called successes in Iraq, similar experiments are being implemented in Afghanistan also. The new scheme of creating local vigilante groups, called the Community Defense Initiative(CDI), will bring together thousands of tribesmen carrying weapons to protect their neighborhoods from Taliban insurgents, particularly focussing on the Taliban heartland in the southern and eastern parts of the country. ² The Community Defence Initiative was regarded as a brain child of General Stanley McChrystal, the US General commanding NATO forces in Afghanistan, who was dismissed by President Obama recently. The NATO partners were quite alarmed of the new programme, the details of which have been held back from non-US alliance members who are likely to strongly protest. The most alarming factor to the sceptics is that the programme includes a scheme of re-empowering militias after billions of international dollars were spent since the US-led invasion in 2001, to disarm such armed groups under the DDR(Disarmament-Demobilization-Reintegration) programme. Senior generals in the Afghan ministries of interior and defence are also worried about what they see as a return to the failed Soviet ploy of setting up such vigilante groups to target the *Mujahidins* during their period of occupation.

According to Thomas Ruttig, co-director of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the US risked losing control over such groups which have in the past turned to looting shops and setting up illegal road checkpoints. Moreover, he warns that such schemes were being launched without proper groundwork. "It is not enough to talk to a few tribal elders and decide that you trust them," Ruttig has recently commented. "No matter how well-trained and culturally aware the Special Forces are they will never be able to get to know enough about a local area to trust the people they are dealing with." The plan also represents a significant change of track from a scheme promoted just last year by General McChrystal's predecessor, David McKiernan, who had encouraged more vigorous expansion of the

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[Dexter Filkins](#), 'Afghan Militias Battle Taliban With Aid of U.S.' in The New York Times, 21 November 2009, (Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/22/world/asia/22militias.html>)(accessed: 22/9/2009)

Afghan regular forces like the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan Police. According to a recent report in *The Guardian* (22nd November 2009), quoting a senior NATO official, McChrystal was always quite dismissive about the Afghan Public Protection Force (APPF). It was regarded as too resource-intensive and slow and McChrystal wanted to move to a much more informal model, which is far less visible and unaccountable.

The dismissal of General McChrystal and his replacement by the Iraq veteran, General David Petraeus has not tempered this enthusiasm for use of the vigilante groups. Petraeus himself has been quite keen to use the village militia to fight insurgents. The Afghan President Karzai had at first resisted the plan fearing the armed groups might increase the power of local warlords. But, according to a BBC news report of 15th July 2010, in a deal with the NATO, Karzai had approved of the CDI with a rider that such forces will report to the Afghan interior ministry.

According to Nader Nadery, a senior member of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, a government body charged by the Afghan constitution to prevent backsliding into Taliban-era abuses, the CDI “is indeed a matter of concern for us who work to promote the rule of law and protect human rights.” Nadery also warned that adding tribal militias risked producing a new round of warlords who would fight for resources and positions of power for a long time. But who really cares about the looming threats when the exit plans from both Afghanistan and Iraq are being finalized by an increasingly jittery US administration. The final withdraw would ensure that only rudimentary regular forces are left behind in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and the US administration seems to have already decided to hand over the lion’s share of the task of securitization to the private PMCs and the vigilante groups, come what may.

The emergence of new patterns of conflict along with the process of globalization has led to the reconfiguration of our understanding of security and the emergence of a new security paradigm in recent years. Within this new paradigm, security is not just the preserve of the state, but of a whole multiplicity of actors. Privatization of security under state initiative, in this connection, may be looked upon as one such measure. The process of privatizing security, however, even when attempted by the state to strengthen itself against dissent, often ends up in weakening the state itself. While different categories of private security providers attempt to reconstruct the state in order to ensure stability and security sufficient for its normal functioning and even survival, they also remove the state’s monopoly over organized violence. The Obama administration, in a hurry to get out, seems incapable of taking into account such possible threats, at least at this point of time.

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