What kind of “Peace” are Britain’s Private Military Companies Bringing to the Middle East?

The US government, with the UK hot on its heels, has long viewed the Middle East as a region where the presence of its army is indispensable not only because there are energy resources there, but due to the opportunity to control vast territories under the guise of “spreading democracy”. Therefore, American and British private military companies (PMCs) have been very actively involved in armed conflicts in the Middle East over recent decades, occupying an equal footing with the conventional armies deployed by their respective countries. The activity of PMCs particularly increased after the start of the “war on terror” declared by the West in 2001, when countries began to offer billions of dollars in contracts for PMCs around the world. The large Western PMCs founded during these years began to play a key role in fulfilling the tasks traditionally assigned to national armed forces. Moreover, according to findings from American experts, these military corporations will play an increasingly important role in local armed conflicts and wars in the future.

Great Britain was one of the first to join the business linked to the activities done by PMCs. According to a report given by the organization Open Democracy in 2018, the United Kingdom has spent approximately £50 million annually on private military and security service companies since 2004, and along with that the global private military and security industry is worth between £69 and £275 billion per year. This means that in essence Great Britain has stood at the forefront of privatizing military operations in “hot spots” like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Yemen, establishing an iron “democratic” order in countries destroyed by Western intervention or armed conflicts.
In addition, British PMCs have treated the civilian population of countries with contempt, resulting in a number of scandalous incidents. And the number of British PMCs in the region has become many times greater than the headcount for the official presence of British military personnel - something which London deliberately hides from the public.

Many of the companies among these PMCs are buzz words. One of the most famous PMCs is the American security firm Blackwater, which was renamed as Academi in 2010.

The second largest PMC in the world is Group 4 Securicor (or G4S for short), which employs more than 650,000 people and exceeds the armed forces of countries like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This is a multinational company that even has its own intelligence service, and is headquartered in the UK in the city of Crawley. The company has representative offices in 125 countries around the world. G4S was founded in 2004 following the merger of the Danish company Group 4 Falck and British Securicor PLC.

Since 2006, the company has been repeatedly criticized for failing to comply with human rights and safety standards. For example, in 2009 a prisoner from western Australia died who was being transported by company employees in a car without any air conditioning, and without access to water; however, a criminal case was not opened back then. In general, over the years that the company has existed, there have been so many incidents discrediting the activities performed by G4S that a separate page was even created on Wikipedia dedicated to this - although that definitely does not fully cover all the scandals that have to do with G4S. The poor quality of the company’s safety training was highlighted in a 2015 case in Mali’s capital, Bamako. Back then, militants from the Al-Mourabitoun, which is associated with Al-Qaeda (both formations are banned in the Russian Federation), attacked the Radisson Blu hotel, shooting everyone who was in the lobby, including six crew members of the Russian airline Volga-Dnepr.

On June 12, 2016, Omar Matin, a nine-year employee at G4S Secure Solutions who had worked for the US Department of Homeland Security, committed a massacre at the Pulse gay club in Orlando, Florida.

In addition, the company is accused of indirect complicity in the assassination of the commander of the Quds Force with the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, General Qassem Soleimani, by providing the Americans with information on the general’s whereabouts, after which his car was hit by a missile from an unmanned aerial vehicle.

Another very active British PMC in the Middle East is Aegis Defense Services, founded in 2002 by former British Army officer Tim Spicer. The company has offices in Kenya, Iraq, Nepal, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and the United States, and is headquartered in Basel (Switzerland). More than 20,000 mercenaries work in the company, and its main client is the US government. In particular, the firm has multi-million dollar contracts with the US government to work in Iraq and Kabul. The company operates in Iraq, Greece, the Congo, Kosovo, Nigeria, Sudan, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Nepal, Kenya, Bahrain, and a slew of other countries. The company’s headcount reaches up to 5,000 people.

In 2005, Aegis Defense Services became involved in a scandal after a video appeared on the Internet in which company employees shot at Iraqi civilians. The company’s management did not acknowledge its guilt, and the Pentagon refused to cooperate with law enforcement agencies any further.

In 2015, Aegis Defense Services was acquired by the Canadian company GardaWorld, which announced the reason was to “enlarge its strategic expansion into Africa and the Middle East”. However, despite this, the company still performs contracts for the US and British governments in Africa and the Middle East, and is actively involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it is known specifically as Aegis, and not as part of GardaWorld. Nevertheless, the trail of smoke from scandals continues to drag along behind this company to this very day - and the latest major, high-profile event surrounding it was the reports of how it recruited former “child soldiers” from African countries. Aegis has hired a significant number of militants from Sierra Leone and Uganda to work in Iraq to cut costs, especially after the budget cuts for the US military mission in Iraq, according to investigative journalism reports. In November 2016, media outlets reported that two Sierra Leoneans had threatened to take legal action against Aegis for “psychological harm” they said it had inflicted on them.

Another British PMC, Erinys International, was founded by two former officers of the British Armed Forces, Jonathan Garrath and Fraser Brown in 2002, and registered in the British Virgin Islands. In 2003, British intelligence officer Alastair Morrison joined the company’s management, but a year later he moved to Kroll, Inc., which is the world’s largest financial intelligence firm. Erinys International has subsidiaries in the UK, the Republic of the Congo, Cyprus, and South Africa, and its employees are mainly from the British intelligence services and special forces. In addition
to participating in hostilities, the company trains foreign military personnel, intelligence officers, and police, in particular in the Middle East and Central Africa. It actively operates in Iraq, where about 6,500 employees were sent to guard its oil pipelines. Erinys operated in northern, central, and southern Iraq, with offices in Mosul, the southern outskirts of Baghdad, and Basra. Iraqi officials proclaimed that Erinys International paid Iraqi tribes $1,100 for every mile of the oil pipeline they protected. In 2004, the company signed a contract to provide assistance to the US Army Corps of Engineers. By 2008, the number of the company’s employees in Iraq alone had already exceeded the number of British forces in that country. From 2007-2009, the company performed a contract in the interests of the oil giant Shell. Currently, the company’s head office is located in Dubai, and in 2011 Erinys International was transformed into a holding company that includes divisions and representative offices in various countries.

Even with its very first contract in Iraq, Erinys International found itself at the epicenter of a scandal after several journalistic investigations into corruption that claimed its contracts were obtained with the assistance of Ahmed Chalabi, who received a reward of two million dollars for his assistance. And the first recruits for the oil field protection forces prepared by the company were members of the Kurdish militia group Free Iraqi Forces, which was created by the US Department of Defense and commanded by Ahmed Chalabi.

In 2004, the company found itself at the center of another scandal after information about the ill-treatment of prisoners emerged: reports from journalists showed that Erinys International employees violated the human rights convention by using brutal torture during a military investigation against a 16-year-old Iraqi.

Also in 2004, that same company wound up in another scandal associated with the work done by former members of units that supported the apartheid regime in South Africa for Erinys International. One of them was Francois Strydom, who was reported by the media as a former member of Koevoet, a South African paramilitary police unit infamous for acts of violence, torture, and murder, and who was on a genuine hunt for Namibian rebels.

The joint American-British PMC Northbridge Services Group is headquartered in the Dominican Republic, with branches in the UK and Ukraine. According to some estimates, it employs about three thousand former British military personnel, as well as several thousand former military personnel from France, South Africa, and the United States. The company rose to prominence in the civil conflict in Liberia in 2003, where it sided with the rebels, resulting in the overthrow of the country’s official government. It even put together a special operation to kidnap the disgraced President of Liberia C. Taylor for an additional fee (about $4 million), but this initiative was rejected as incendiary and outlandish.

The British PMC Olive Group, which actively operates in Syria, is well known for its participation in setting up provocative actions in this Arab country, including those that involved the participation of the already well-known “White Helmets”. The company was founded in 2001 by members of the United Kingdom Special Forces - Prince William’s friend Captain Harry Legge Bourke of the Welsh Guards and Chris St. George of the Parachute Regiment. It is registered in the UK (its acting beneficiaries are in the United States and Abu Dhabi), its founders are associated with the elite in the military and intelligence services, and its owners are with the US Republican Party and sheikhs in the Middle East. Until the mid-2010s, the main scope of activities for Olive Group employees were Iraq and Syria, but then its employees also began to work in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Mali, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Nigeria. In 2015, Olive Group was taken over by the American company Constellis (the deal was worth about $300 million), which brought together a number of other PMCs under its wing: ACADEMI, Triple Canopy, Centerra, AMK9, Edinburgh International, Strategic Social. In 2016, the PMC group changed owners again - and it turned out to be businessmen who are part of the social circles around former US President Donald Trump, and who are billionaires in the Republican Party.

Former British intelligence officer James Le Mesurier worked for Olive Group for three years (2005-2008), serving as vice president of social affairs. In 2014, he created Mayday Rescue, the so-called Syrian Civil Defense organization, more commonly known as the “White Helmets”. He then became the ideal contender for the role of a liaison between Olive Group, militant provocateurs, and the volunteers with White Helmets that Britain used to “help victims of the chemical attack” in its subversive actions against the authorities in Damascus.

In Syria the British, using their PMCs, have even set up their own zone of influence - this is the province of Idlib, where London has been operating since the end of 2016 after the liberation of Aleppo. Idlib was just where a British brigadier general, with the assistance of British PMCs, put together an armed group made up of locals, recruiting them into the ranks of the so-called “moderate opposition”; and these were the regions where £69 million just melted away that the British foundation Adam Smith International had allegedly transferred to the accounts held by the Free Syrian Police. Later on, it turned out that these funds were seized by militants from the Al-Nusra Front (a
terrorist group prohibited in the Russian Federation), and the abovementioned fund was at the center of a scandal related to providing financing to Al-Qaida (banned in the Russian Federation).

Taking into account what has been stated above, and the numerous facts involving scandals related to the activities performed by British PMCs in the Middle East, their activities are by no means perceived in positive terms, as is the overall policy adopted by Great Britain in this region. And the number of British PMCs, which has grown to an unimaginable size here, makes the issue of the need to withdraw these forces, which are effectively NATO armed forces, from the region an especially pressing one today.

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