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Information Mercenaries: The New Soldiers of Fortune ^[1]

mer·ce·nary

noun \mr-s-ner-?, -ne-r?\

: a soldier who is paid by a foreign country to fight in its army : a soldier who will fight for any group or country that hires him (Merriam-Webster)

Say that you work for a private security company (PSC) and most people think one of two things: Either you are a mall cop. Or you work for Blackwater, the infamous private security firm, and you go around shooting people. Blackwater rose to notoriety in 2007 for the Nisour Square incident in which 17 Iraqi civilians were killed and 20 were injured when Blackwater personnel, under contract for the U.S. State Department, opened fire while clearing a route for U.S. officials. The ensuing outrage from Iraqis prompted a string of investigations, including one by the FBI, and brought to light the highly unregulated environment in which foreign PSCs operated in Iraq. The FBI's investigation found that at least 14 of the 17 people killed in the incident were shot without cause, and a range of charges, including manslaughter, were levied upon the guards involved.

Guns and trucks

The Nisour Square incident would damage the credibility of all PSCs for years to come, and not just those in Iraq. Blackwater itself would change its name twice – first to Xe Services in 2009 then to Academi in 2011 – to try to restore its reputation (even though everyone still knows it by its original name). As for other private security companies, they have evolved – both deliberately, to distance themselves from being perceived as mercenaries running around with guns and trucks; and organically, to adapt to the maturing security environments of places like Iraq. Regulation, for example, (albeit sometimes stifled by corruption, bureaucracy, and inertia), means that the “Wild West” days, of PSCs roaming about Iraq shooting first and asking questions never, are long over. Indeed, many Western PSCs currently operating in Iraq have not fired a single bullet in years.

Lifecycle of a post-war security environment

When a liberating (‘occupying’) force (aka the U.S. Military), leaves a country (or, at least, the military campaign is over), the diplomats and private industry (aka International Oil Companies) move in. With them come the private security companies to provide them protection. [Actually, some PSCs are often part of the war campaign itself to supplement military efforts].

Many, if not most, Western private security companies were founded by ex-military officers and soldiers, usually special forces or similar. And they often recruit their buddies (the “Old Boys’ Network”), who are just getting out of the military. In a new post-war environment, this is reasonable. Ex-soldiers will have the skills and abilities demanded by the still volatile security environment that a military campaign leaves behind. Bodyguards are for celebrities. Entry-level armed guards on the ground in hostile environments are known as “shooters.”

A mercenary is a soldier who will work for any group that hires him; a shooter is an ex-soldier who will do the same. The PSC market is colloquially known by many as the “circuit,” as contractors go round from one company to another and back again depending on who is offering the best terms.

What happens over time, though, is that the market “matures” towards local nationalisation of

security provision. Indigenous PSCs will spring up as cheap and cheerful alternatives to their foreign (Western) counterparts. The international oil companies and other clients will switch to these local providers, attracted by the cheaper contracts and “encouraged” by the host government. Thus, the Western PSCs, with their guns, trucks, and shooters become less relevant.

Information mercenaries

How do foreign PSCs continue to do business in a mature “nationalised” security market, like Iraq? Supporting the shooters on the ground in the first place would be a system of intelligence analysts (“int” or “intel”, depending which side of the Atlantic you are from). In the early security market, these int guys would also most likely be ex-military. Later though, “consultants” come into the picture – a much more civilian job title. As the host government and clients start to want to see fewer guns and trucks (even if they are still there), they want to see more consultants. A consultancy sector is a sign of an industrialized nation and this is something to which governments like that of Iraq aspire. The new shooters, then, are those who can handle information rather than AK-47s. [It is taboo to use the word *intelligence* in the private security world because that makes host governments think you are spying].

These information mercenaries can be former career soldiers, even if they were not military intelligence, as there are courses and qualifications available in security management, which turn them into security consultants. Or they can be civilians with an analysis background, for example. The point is that it is this different breed of contractor which is more relevant in a mature security market like Iraq. They are still members of the private security world and, while they may have done time on the ground as actual shooters, they are a different species to the Blackwater guards in Nisour Square in 2007. They are not mall cops either.

Public diplomacy of private security

While the public diplomacy aspects of a military campaign ought to be managed by the governments involved, the phrase “public diplomacy” does not even exist in the private security world. Ex-soldiers are often unaware of how their actions in a foreign country, and the way in which they interact with the local population, can elicit significant consequences. Before, they had the military, their government, and the umbrella of war to protect them. In the private security world, they are open to liability. The Nisour Square incident is a prime example.

Information mercenaries can play a role here. They are more likely to be aware of, or at least are capable of understanding, public diplomacy due to their typically more educated backgrounds (either post military or in lieu of). Private security companies would do well to recognize the need for public diplomacy and recruit individuals who can handle it. As alluded to earlier, host governments are often more amenable to consultancies and allow PSCs, with a “softer” image, a smoother ride than those with reputations hardened by armor and weapons. This, in turn, makes these private security *consultancies* more attractive to potential clients. We are in an era where nothing can be covered up for very long and reputation is everything. Information mercenaries are necessary for an information age.
