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Terrorism with a “Human Face”: The History of America’s Death Squads

By Prof Michel Chossudovsky

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The recruitment of death squads is part of a well established US military-intelligence agenda. There is a long and gruesome US history of covert funding and support of terror brigades and targeted assassinations going back to the Vietnam war.

As government forces continue to confront the self-proclaimed “Free Syrian Army” (FSA), the historical roots of the West’s covert war on Syria –which has resulted in countless atrocities– must be fully revealed.

From the outset in March 2011, the US and its allies have supported the formation of death squads and the incursion of terrorist brigades in a carefully planned undertaking.

The recruitment and training of terror brigades in both Iraq and Syria was modeled on the “Salvador Option”, a “terrorist model” of mass killings by US sponsored death squads in Central America. It was first applied in El Salvador, in the heyday of resistance against the military dictatorship, resulting in an estimated 75,000 deaths.

The formation of death squads in Syria builds upon the history and experience of US sponsored terror brigades in Iraq, under the Pentagon’s “counterinsurgency” program.

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The Establishment of Death Squads in Iraq



US sponsored death squads were recruited in Iraq starting in 2004-2005 in an initiative launched under the helm of the US Ambassador **John Negroponte**, [image: right] who was dispatched to Baghdad by the US State Department in June 2004.

Negroponte was the “man for the job”. As US Ambassador to Honduras from 1981 to 1985. Negroponte played a key role in supporting and supervising the Nicaraguan Contras based in Honduras as well as overseeing the activities of the Honduran military death squads.

“Under the rule of General Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, Honduras’s military government was both a close ally of the Reagan administration and was “disappearing” dozens of political opponents in classic death squad fashion.”

In January 2005, the Pentagon, confirmed that it was considering:

” forming hit squads of Kurdish and Shia fighters to target leaders of the Iraqi insurgency [Resistance] in a strategic shift borrowed from the American struggle against left-wing guerrillas in Central America 20 years ago”.

Under the so-called “El Salvador option”, **Iraqi and American forces would be sent to kill or kidnap insurgency leaders, even in Syria, where some are thought to shelter. ...**

Hit squads would be controversial and would probably be kept secret.

The experience of the so-called “death squads” in Central America remains raw for many even now and helped to sully the image of the United States in the region.

Then, the Reagan Administration funded and trained teams of nationalist forces to neutralise Salvadorean rebel leaders and sympathisers. ...

John Negroponte, the US Ambassador in Baghdad, had a front-row seat at the time as Ambassador to Honduras from 1981-85.

Death squads were a brutal feature of Latin American politics of the time. ...

In the early 1980s President Reagan's Administration funded and helped to train Nicaraguan contras based in Honduras with the aim of ousting Nicaragua's Sandinista regime. **The Contras were equipped using money from illegal American arms sales to Iran, a scandal that could have toppled Mr Reagan.**

The thrust of the Pentagon proposal in Iraq, ... is to follow that model ...

It is unclear whether the main aim of the missions would be to assassinate the rebels or kidnap them and take them away for interrogation. Any mission in Syria would probably be undertaken by US Special Forces.

Nor is it clear who would take responsibility for such a programme — the Pentagon or the Central Intelligence Agency. Such covert operations have traditionally been run by the CIA at arm's length from the administration in power, giving US officials the ability to deny knowledge of it. (El Salvador-style 'death squads' to be deployed by US against Iraq militants – Times Online, January 10, 2005, emphasis added)

While the stated objective of the "Iraq Salvador Option" was to "take out the insurgency", in practice the US sponsored terror brigades were involved in routine killings of civilians with a view to fomenting sectarian violence. In turn, the CIA and MI6 were overseeing "Al Qaeda in Iraq" units involved in targeted assassinations directed against the Shiite population. Of significance, the death squads were integrated and advised by undercover US Special Forces.

Robert Stephen Ford –subsequently appointed US Ambassador to Syria– was part of Negroponte's team in Baghdad in 2004-2005. In January 2004, he was dispatched as U.S. representative to the Shiite city of Najaf which was the stronghold of the Mahdi army, with which he made preliminary contacts.

In January 2005, Robert S. Ford's was appointed Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the US Embassy under the helm of Ambassador John Negroponte. He was not only part of the inner team, he was Negroponte's partner in setting up the Salvador Option. Some of the groundwork had been established in Najaf prior to Ford's transfer to Baghdad.



John Negroponte and Robert Stephen Ford were put in charge of recruiting the Iraqi death squads. While Negroponte coordinated the operation from his office at the US Embassy, Robert S. Ford, who was fluent in both Arabic and Turkish, was entrusted with the task of establishing strategic contacts with Shiite and Kurdish militia groups outside the “Green Zone”.

Two other embassy officials, namely **Henry Ensher** (Ford’s Deputy) and a younger official in the political section, **Jeffrey Beals**, played an important role in the team “talking to a range of Iraqis, including extremists”. (See *The New Yorker*, March 26, 2007). Another key individual in Negroponte’s team was **James Franklin Jeffrey**, America’s ambassador to Albania (2002-2004). In 2010, Jeffrey was appointed US Ambassador to Iraq (2010-2012).

Negroponte also brought into the team one of his former collaborators **Colonel James Steele** (ret) from his Honduras heyday:

Under the “Salvador Option,” “Negroponte had assistance from his colleague from his days in Central America during the 1980’s, **Ret. Col James Steele. Steele, whose title in Baghdad was Counselor for Iraqi Security Forces supervised the selection and training of members of the Badr Organization and Mehdi Army**, the two largest Shi’ite militias in Iraq, in order to target the leadership and support networks of a primarily Sunni resistance. Planned or not, these death squads promptly spiralled out of control to become the leading cause of death in Iraq.

Intentional or not, the scores of tortured, mutilated bodies which turn up on the streets of Baghdad each day are **generated by the death squads whose impetus was John Negroponte. And it is this U.S.-backed sectarian violence which largely led to the hell-disaster that Iraq is today.** (Dahr Jamail, *Managing Escalation: Negroponte and Bush’s New Iraq Team*,. Antiwar.com, January 7, 2007)



“Colonel Steele was responsible, according to Rep. Dennis Kucinich for implementing “a plan in El Salvador under which tens of thousands Salvadorans “disappeared” or were murdered, including Archbishop Oscar Romero and four American nuns.”

Upon his appointment to Baghdad, Colonel Steele was assigned to a counter-insurgency unit known as the “Special Police Commando” under the Iraqi Interior Ministry” (See ACN, Havana, June 14, 2006)

Reports confirm that “the US military turned over many prisoners to the **Wolf Brigade**, the feared 2nd battalion of the interior ministry’s special commandos” which so happened to be under supervision of Colonel Steele:

“US soldiers, US advisers, were standing aside and doing nothing,” while members of the **Wolf Brigade beat and tortured prisoners.** The interior ministry commandos took over the public library in Samarra, and turned it into a detention centre, he said. An interview conducted by Maass [of the New York Times] in 2005 at the improvised prison, accompanied by the Wolf Brigade’s US military adviser, Col James Steele, had been interrupted by the terrified screams of a prisoner outside, he said. Steele was reportedly previously employed as an adviser to help crush an insurgency in El Salvador.” (Ibid, emphasis added)

Another notorious figure who played a role in Iraq’s counter-insurgency program was Former New York Police Commissioner **Bernie Kerik** [image: Bernie Kerik in Baghdad Police Academy with body guards] who in 2007 was indicted in federal court on 16 felony charges.



Kerik had been appointed by the Bush administration at the outset of the occupation in 2003 to assist in the organization and training of the Iraqi Police force. During his short stint in 2003, Bernie Kerik –who took on the position of interim Minister of the Interior– worked towards organizing terror units within the Iraqi Police force: “Dispatched to Iraq to whip Iraqi security forces into shape, Kerik dubbed himself the “interim interior minister of Iraq.” **British police advisors called him the “Baghdad terminator,”** (Salon, December 9, 2004, emphasis added)

Under Negroponte’s helm at the US Embassy in Baghdad, a wave of covert civilian killings and targeted assassinations had been unleashed. Engineers, medical doctors, scientists and intellectuals were also targeted.

Author and geopolitical analyst Max Fuller has documented in detail the atrocities committed under the US sponsored counterinsurgency program.

The appearance of death squads was first highlighted in May this year [2005], ...dozens of bodies were found casually disposed ... in vacant areas around Baghdad. All of the victims had been handcuffed, blindfolded and shot in the head and many of them also showed signs of having been brutally tortured. ...

The evidence was sufficiently compelling for the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), a leading Sunni organisation, to issue public statements in which they accused the security forces attached to the Ministry of the Interior as well as the Badr Brigade, the former armed wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), of being behind the killings. They also accused the Ministry of the Interior of conducting state terrorism (Financial Times).

The Police Commandos as well as the Wolf Brigade were overseen by the US counterinsurgency program in the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior:

The Police Commandos were formed under the experienced tutelage and oversight of veteran US counterinsurgency fighters, and from the outset conducted joint-force operations with **elite and highly secretive US special-forces units** (Reuters, National Review Online).

...A key figure in the development of the Special Police Commandos was James Steele, a former US Army special forces operative who cut his teeth in Vietnam before moving on to direct the US military mission in El Salvador at the height of that country's civil war. ...

Another US contributor was the same **Steven Casteel** who as the most senior US advisor within the Interior Ministry brushed off serious and well-substantiated accusations of appalling human right violations as 'rumor and innuendo'. Like Steele, Casteel gained considerable experience in Latin America, in his case participating in the hunt for the cocaine baron Pablo Escobar in Colombia's Drugs Wars of the 1990s ...

Casteel's background is significant because this kind of intelligence-gathering support role and the production of death lists are characteristic of US involvement in counterinsurgency programs and constitute the underlying thread in what can appear to be random, disjointed killing sprees.

Such **centrally planned genocides** are entirely consistent with what is taking place in Iraq today [2005] ...It is also consistent with what little we know about the Special Police Commandos, which was tailored to provide the Interior Ministry with a special-forces strike capability (US Department of Defense). In keeping with such a role, the Police Commando headquarters has become the hub of a nationwide command, control, communications, computer and intelligence operations centre, courtesy of the US. (Max Fuller, op cit)

This initial groundwork established under Negroponte in 2005 was implemented under his successor Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. Robert Stephen Ford ensured the continuity of the project prior to his appointment as US Ambassador to Algeria in 2006, as well as upon his return to Baghdad as Deputy Chief of Mission in 2008.

Operation "Syrian Contras": Learning from the Iraqi Experience

The gruesome Iraqi version of the "Salvador Option" under the helm of Ambassador John Negroponte has served as a "role model" for setting up the "Free Syrian Army" Contras. Robert Stephen Ford was, no doubt, involved in the implementation of the Syrian Contras project, following his reassignment to Baghdad as Deputy Head of Mission in 2008.

The objective in Syria was to create factional divisions between Sunni, Alawite, Shiite, Kurds, Druze and Christians. While the Syrian context is entirely different to that of Iraq, there are striking similarities with regard to the procedures whereby the killings and atrocities were conducted.

A report published by *Der Spiegel* pertaining to atrocities committed in the Syrian city of Homs confirms an organized sectarian process of mass-murder and extra-judicial killings comparable to that conducted by the US sponsored death squads in Iraq.

People in Homs were routinely categorized as "prisoners" (Shia, Alawite) and "traitors". The "traitors" are Sunni civilians within the rebel occupied urban area, who express their disagreement or opposition to the rule of terror of the Free Syrian Army (FSA):

“Since last summer [2011], we have executed slightly fewer than 150 men, which represents about 20 percent of our prisoners,” says Abu Rami. ... But the executioners of Homs have been busier with traitors within their own ranks than with prisoners of war. **“If we catch a Sunni spying, or if a citizen betrays the revolution, we make it quick,”** says the fighter. **According to Abu Rami, Hussein’s burial brigade has put between 200 and 250 traitors to death since the beginning of the uprising.”** (Der Spiegel, March 30, 2012)

The project required an initial program of recruitment and training of mercenaries. Death squads including Lebanese and Jordanian Salafist units entered Syria’s southern border with Jordan in mid-March 2011. Much of the groundwork was already in place prior to Robert Stephen Ford’s arrival in Damascus in January 2011.



Ambassador Ford in Hama in early July 2011

Ford’s appointment as Ambassador to Syria was announced in early 2010. Diplomatic relations had been cut in 2005 following the Rafick Hariri assassination, which Washington blamed on Syria. Ford arrived in Damascus barely two months before the onset of the insurgency.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA)



Washington and its allies replicated in Syria the essential features of the “Iraq Salvador Option”, leading to the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and its various terrorist factions including the Al Qaeda affiliated Al Nusra brigades.

While the creation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) was announced in June 2011, the recruitment and training of foreign mercenaries was initiated at a much an earlier period.

In many regards, the Free Syrian Army is a smokescreen. It is upheld by the Western media as a *bona fide* military entity established as a result of mass defections from government forces. The number of defectors, however, was neither significant nor sufficient to establish a coherent military structure with command and control functions.

The FSA is not a professional military entity, rather it is a loose network of separate terrorist brigades, which in turn are made up of numerous paramilitary cells operating in different parts of the country.

Each of these terrorist organizations operates independently. The FSA does not effectively exercise command and control functions including liaison with these diverse paramilitary entities. The latter are controlled by US-NATO sponsored special forces and intelligence operatives which are embedded within the ranks of selected terrorist formations.

These (highly trained) Special forces on the ground (many of whom are employees of private security companies) are routinely in contact with US-NATO and allied military/intelligence command units (including Turkey). These embedded Special Forces are, no doubt, also involved in the carefully planned bomb attacks directed against government buildings, military compounds, etc.

The death squads are mercenaries trained and recruited by the US, NATO, its Persian Gulf GCC allies as well as Turkey. They are overseen by allied special forces (including British SAS and French Parachutistes), and private security companies on contract to NATO and the Pentagon. In this regard, reports confirm the arrest by the Syrian government of some 200-300 private security company employees who had integrated rebel ranks.

The Jabhat Al Nusra Front

The Al Nusra Front –which is said to be affiliated to Al Qaeda– is described as the most effective “opposition” rebel fighting group, responsible for several of the high profile bomb attacks. Portrayed as an enemy of America (on the State Department list of terrorist organizations), Al

Nusra operations, nonetheless, bear the fingerprints of US paramilitary training, terror tactics and weapons systems. The atrocities committed against civilians by Al Nusra (funded covertly by US-NATO) are similar to those undertaken by the US sponsored death squads in Iraq.

In the words of Al Nusra leader Abu Adnan in Aleppo: “Jabhat al-Nusra does count Syrian veterans of the Iraq war among its numbers, men who bring expertise — especially the manufacture of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) — to the front in Syria.”

As in Iraq, factional violence and ethnic cleansing were actively promoted. In Syria, the Alawite, Shiite and Christian communities have been the target of the US-NATO sponsored death squads. The Alawite and the Christian community are the main targets of the assassination program. Confirmed by the Vatican News Service:

Christians in Aleppo are victims of death and destruction due to the fighting which for months, has been affecting the city. The Christian neighborhoods, in recent times, have been hit by rebel forces fighting against the regular army and this has caused an exodus of civilians.

Some groups in the rugged opposition, where there are also jihadist groups, “fire on Christian houses and buildings, to force occupants to escape and then take possession [ethnic cleansing] (Agenzia Fides. Vatican News, October 19, 2012)

“The Sunni Salafist militants – says the Bishop – continue to commit crimes against civilians, or to recruit fighters with force. The fanatical Sunni extremists are fighting a holy war proudly, especially against the Alawites. When terrorists seek to control the religious identity of a suspect, they ask him to cite the genealogies dating back to Moses. And they ask to recite a prayer that the Alawites removed. The Alawites have no chance to get out alive.” (Agenzia Fides 04/06/2012)

Reports confirm the influx of Salafist and Al Qaeda affiliated death squads as well as brigades under the auspices of the Muslim Brotherhood into Syria from the inception of the insurgency in March 2011.

Moreover, reminiscent of the enlistment of the Mujahideen to wage the CIA’s jihad (holy war) in the heyday of the Soviet-Afghan war, NATO and the Turkish High command, according to Israeli intelligence sources, had initiated”

“a campaign to enlist thousands of Muslim volunteers in Middle East countries and the Muslim world to fight alongside the Syrian rebels. The Turkish army would house these volunteers, train them and secure their passage into Syria. (DEBKAFfile, NATO to give rebels anti-tank weapons, August 14, 2011).

Private Security Companies and the Recruitment of Mercenaries



According to reports, private security companies operating out of Gulf States are involved in the recruiting and training of mercenaries.

Although not specifically earmarked for the recruitment of mercenaries directed against Syria, reports point to the creation of training camps in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In Zayed Military City (UAE), “a secret army is in the making” operated by Xe Services, formerly Blackwater. The UAE deal to establish a military camp for the training of mercenaries was signed in July 2010, nine months before the onslaught of the wars in Libya and Syria.

In recent developments, security companies on contract to NATO and the Pentagon are involved in training “opposition” death squads in the use of chemical weapons:

“The United States and some European allies **are using defense contractors to train Syrian rebels on how to secure chemical weapons stockpiles in Syria**, a senior U.S. official and several senior diplomats told CNN Sunday. (CNN Report, December 9, 2012)

The names of the companies involved were not revealed.

Behind Closed Doors at the US State Department

Robert Stephen Ford was part of a small team at the US State Department team which oversaw the recruitment and training of terrorist brigades, together with **Derek Chollet** and **Frederic C. Hof**, a former business partner of Richard Armitage, who served as Washington’s “special coordinator on Syria”. Derek Chollet has recently been appointed to the position of Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA).

This team operated under the helm of (former) Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs **Jeffrey Feltman**.

Feltman’s team was in close liaison with the process of recruitment and training of mercenaries out of Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Libya (courtesy of the post-Gaddafi regime, which dispatched six hundred Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) troops to Syria, via Turkey in the months following the September 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi government).

Assistant Secretary of State Feltman was in contact with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince **Saud al-Faisal**, and Qatari Foreign Minister **Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim**. He was also in charge of a Doha-based office for “special security coordination” pertaining to Syria, which included representatives from Western and GCC intelligence agencies well as a representative from Libya. **Prince Bandar bin Sultan**, a prominent and controversial member of Saudi intelligence was part of this group. (See Press Tv, May 12, 2012).



In June 2012, Jeffrey Feltman (image: Left) was appointed UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, a strategic position which, in practice, consists in setting the UN agenda (on behalf of Washington) on issues pertaining to “Conflict Resolution” in various “political hot spots” around the world (including Somalia, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Mali). In a bitter irony, the countries for UN “conflict resolution” are those which are the target of US covert operations.

In liaison with the US State Department, NATO and his GCC handlers in Doha and Riyadh, Feltman is Washington’s man behind UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahmi’s “Peace Proposal”.

Meanwhile, while paying lip service to the UN Peace initiative, the US and NATO have speeded up the process of recruitment and training of mercenaries in response to the heavy casualties incurred by “opposition” rebel forces.

The US proposed “end game” in Syria is not regime change, but the destruction of Syria as a Nation State.

The deployment of “opposition” death squads with a mandate to kill civilians is part of this criminal undertaking.

“Terrorism with a Human Face” is upheld by the United Nations Human Rights Council, which constitutes a mouthpiece for NATO “Humanitarian Interventions” under the doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P).

The atrocities committed by the US-NATO death squads are casually blamed on the government of Bashar Al Assad. According to UN Human Rights Council High Commissioner Navi Pillay:

“This massive loss of life could have been avoided if the Syrian Government had chosen to take a different path than one of ruthless suppression of what were initially peaceful and legitimate protests by unarmed civilians,” (quoted in Stephen Lendman, UN Human Rights Report on Syria: Camouflage of US-NATO Sponsored Massacres, Global Research, January 3, 2012)

Washington's "unspeakable objective" consists in breaking up Syria as a sovereign nation –along ethnic and religious lines– into several separate and "independent" political entities.