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Security Operations in a Semi-permissive War Zone & Protective Security Details in Iraq

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PART 2 of 3

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Dated: June 2004 – Iraq

INTRODUCTION

The following paper is derived from my personal experience in Kosovo and Afghanistan, my observations of a number of security providers operating in and around Baghdad, Iraq, along with Protective Security Details (PSD) assigned to the US military commanders and political leaders. This is combined with over two decades of experience studying insurgency, running security operations, teaching small unit tactics, and training special operations teams.

The purpose of this paper is to draw comparisons and give some insight into the various approaches private security companies (PSC) have taken to running PSDs in Iraq. It is not the purpose of this paper to offer criticism of any one company or organization, but simply to initiate an academic discussion of the subject on a tactical level with the hope of finding solutions to some difficult problems.

TACTICAL METHODOLOGY

There are basically three tactical philosophies or methodologies at play with security companies currently running PSDs in Iraq.

1. The first is the high-profile movements with multiple armored SUVs, usually large American Chevy Suburbans, Ford Expeditions and Excursions. The drivers and shooters are all fully kitted with visible body armor, load-bearing equipment, additional ammunition, FBG stun grenades, and automatic weapons – M4s, MP-5s or AKs. This is the “US Model” that is common with US governmental and military PSDs run by companies such as Blackwater, Triple Canopy, Global, Armor Group, Olive, etc. The tactical advantage that these teams derive from this approach is not only overwhelming firepower but also a certain deterrent

- factor. This would be the case where one or two insurgents may opt not to attack a large “fighting formation” when they can wait for an easier and softer target.
2. At the other end of the spectrum is the ultra-low key “Low Profile Model” utilizing locally purchased armored Mercedes, local soft-skinned vehicles and even taxis driven by Iraqi drivers. This is the methodology being utilized by companies such as SIS and AISG. It must be understood that this approach is not just a tactical decision but also a fiscal one. Many of these newer start-up companies simply do not have the financial resource to invest in a fleet of new armored vehicles so are running “guerrilla security operations”. However, they are benefiting from very low profile movements in unobtrusive vehicles. They are also successfully selling this concept to a number of clients.
 3. The third methodology is the “Corporate Model” which falls between these first two. Corporate security companies are employing a somewhat low-profile approach while still driving identifiable up-armored fleet SUVs. The PSDs are armed but not obviously so. This could be considered “semi-tactical”. Unfortunately it has neither the deterrence of full para-military firepower nor the safety of totally “low profile” movements.

4.

The fourth approach that is not currently being utilized by private security in Iraq is the “Military Model” which would require up-armored Humvees, light armored vehicles (LAVs), or APCs equipped with crew-served weapons systems such as the GPMG, 240G, Mk-19 and M2 BMG .50 caliber. This model has been used by private security in Afghanistan and has been considered by several security contractors in Iraq – particularly for convoy escort duty in remote areas. This is the only model that offers immediate and aggressive counter-force and suppressive fire for an ambush break-contact drill.

CORPORATE PHILOSOPHY

A few western companies have cultivated a corporate image of impeccable professionalism and expertise in the fields of high-end risk management and international security. They have also gone to great lengths to distance themselves from any association with private military corporations (PMCs) and para-military operations such as EO and Sandline.

One British company in particular established itself as one of the foremost respected organizations in the international security field, earning this reputation through detailed and professional intelligence collection, threat analysis and identification, and **risk avoidance**. Unfortunately elevated risk is a part of daily life in Baghdad and Iraq that realistically cannot be avoided, only minimized.

If a security company was to be true to the concept of risk avoidance, they would simply advise their clients not to come to Iraq. But in the current context, we have moved past that point or option. A few companies brought to Iraq very professional operations with first-class personnel and equipment, along with communications, intelligence and logistical support. But was there room for improvement? The answer must always be most definitely. As the situation and threats change on the ground, security equipment and procedures must also change.

The PSD model that was being run in Baghdad in early 2004, for example, of two Land Cruiser SUVs with a driver and a shooter in each, is no different to the model that would be run in any number of US or European cities in a peacetime environment. A two vehicle movement of a limo and a follow car for any important client, under any conditions, would be considered minimal; and clients with the resources would always opt for armored vehicles. However, even in relatively safe environments, the preference has always been to run three vehicles to include a “zone car” or dedicated CAT (counter attack) fighting vehicle with no clients on board.

In Iraq, a number of PSCs appear to be applying the tried and proven methodologies for **corporate security in a permissive environment** to security operations in a more high threat **semi-permissive war zone**. They are following the time-proven security doctrine of intelligence collection and risk analysis, and when the threat indicates, shutting down all movements for the safety of the client and PSDs.

This philosophy and methodology cannot be faulted from a risk management standpoint, especially where the corporate client absolutely does not want their employees injured, kidnapped or killed. However, it has become evident that several contractors and clients working in Iraq are willing to raise their threshold for risk (pain tolerance) to have more freedom of movement and in an effort to become more productive.

In some cases, it has been noted by reconstruction contractors that a **risk avoidance** policy and refusal to run PSDs when the threat level warrants, has been considered a hindrance to the client’s work output and movements. However, it must also be noted that these same clients may be somewhat uninformed as to the actual threat and dynamics at play. They focus only on their immediate needs without considering the very real risks that intelligence may have identified.

It has been observed that the construction client employees appear not to care how risky it is to make the run to BIAP. When it is time to go on R&R their only concern is not missing their flight. Going on R&R is a very emotional subject and their decision process flies contrary to sound security thinking. Never-the-less, they are willing to go with any security provider who is willing to make the run, even if that provider does not have the intelligence and communications resources of a professional PSC – and even if that security provider is enjoying a run of success derived **more from luck than planning**.

WORKING IN IRAQ & BAGHDAD

Where other security providers working in and around Baghdad **accept the risk** of movements in this current **high threat** environment, other PSCs continue to employ their time-honored philosophy of **risk avoidance**. But again, it must be noted that risk avoidance in an insurgent war zone is all but impossible if movements are designed to support an acceptable level of productive work for the clients. Every movement carries risk but the statistical possibility of an attack even if the probability is slight.

PSCs may be losing ground with clients when they shut down PSD movements while other provider’s are making successful runs at the same time and on the same routes. This was observed in Baghdad when one PSC cancelled movements based on sound intelligence, but then three other providers and numerous sub-contractors in soft-skinned vehicles had come up the same route successfully. This leaves the client wondering

why, if that PSC's people and vehicles are so good, they did not make the run. The answer is obvious to the security professional but less obvious to the untrained client.

After talking with several other providers making runs north of Baghdad, it is evident that some teams actually thrive on the risk and enjoy the challenge of a dangerous route or movement. It is safe to say that some contract security personnel employed by other companies are actually spoiling for a fight.

Granted, a big part of a successful run is **luck**, especially when the movement is made oblivious to elevated threat indicators and lacking sound intelligence, but the client only sees a group of hard men willing to get them from A to B. Since statistically the probability of an attack on a specific PSD, on any specific road, at any specific time, is slight, these more aggressive teams end up earning a reputation as being gutsy not foolhardy (in the eyes of the client).

However, the laws of probability can also work against a security provider. The bigger the footprint, the more numerous the clients, and the greater the number of PSD runs, the higher the probability that one of these teams will be **unlucky**. This is not a product of poor planning or bad tactics, but simply **bad luck** when a PSD drives into an opportunistic ambush or IED.

RISK ACCEPTANCE

Instead of risk avoidance, the working model for other companies in Iraq seems to be **risk acceptance & risk identification**, and then attempting to adapt their tactics to suit the mission. This is done by either venturing out in full battle mode with the most powerful vehicles and weapons available, or by going low profile and trying to slip through unnoticed. Both these tactics have obvious strengths and weaknesses.

Even the best armored SUV is still vulnerable to RPG and IED attacks, but the weight and power may carry them thru the kill zone to get the client off the X. Heavily armored SUVs also deny the opportunity for return fire or aggressive counter-force except for ramming. Those traveling in low profile mode are also extremely vulnerable if their cover is blown and they are caught in traffic. The heavy low-slung sedans, while they may handle better on the open road, are just not suited to curb jumping, ramming or going off-road in exigent circumstance. The armor in local vehicles is also of unknown origin and quality.

On the personnel side, going in with a PSD that is kitted-up for a fight with full body armor, state-of-the-art weapons, multiple accessible magazines, and stun grenades, is not only preferable to the shooters, it also gives the clients a greater sense of security. This "look and feeling" of security, even if it is not tangible, cannot be underestimated when dealing with a clients' perception and sense of well being. Some clients have been sold on the heavy "US model" that they have seen around town with companies such as Blackwater, and there are times when this model is the more preferred option.

Again, and at the other end of the spectrum, utilizing local Iraqi drivers and shooters has both benefits and risks. The benefits being that they can drive around without drawing attention, they know the streets, and may be less likely to be attacked. The risks lie in

their basic lack of training and experience and the potential for betrayal. If this model is to be used, then thorough vetting and training is essential.

Between these two groups we again find a small number of PSCs running a more corporate model. While one British PSC hires the best personnel with exceptional experience and talents, this may not be evident or visible to the client. Many US clients and their employees have never heard of the SAS so do not appreciate the extensive training and experience of most of these PSD operators. The clients will see the body armor but rarely the handguns or automatic weapons. By trying to conceal the weapons and armor, PSD personnel cannot carry a load-bearing vest with multiple magazines and accessible FBGs, nor do they have ready access to their weapons in some configurations. Handguns are often buried under shirts, body armor and loose vests, and two or three extra rifle magazines are stuffed in vest pockets.

There have been a number of deficiencies in the personal kit issued to some PSC personnel beginning with lack of standardization of modern handguns; an assortment of holsters, some not designed for the handguns; AK-47s of dubious origin purchased locally instead of new M-4s; unreliable Iraqi ammunition; a lack of optical sights; a lack of suitable mag pouches; an assortment of foreign ammunition; and no FBGs. In some cases, the individual operators appear to be left to procure locally what they need.

It would be unheard of in the military special operations community to send operators into a hostile environment without the opportunity to zero and become familiar with their personal weapons; or to be told to procure weapons locally. When some PSC personnel rotate back in country, they may often be issued different weapons to the ones they carried on the previous deployment. There also needs to be permanent training facilities for formal and informal weekly test-firing, zeroing and training.

No matter how professional and competent the British, Australian or New Zealand SAS operators, the client often does not see the uniformity and firepower that they see in the "US model" teams. All the client sees is a group of polite, professional young men in baggy vests and shirts. Granted, the British model is perfectly valid for most missions, but when the threat level increases, and the client needs to be moved, then the more robust model may be preferable.

TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS & SOLUTIONS

One of the fundamental principals of tactical operations is **flexibility** – and this applies equally to security operations. This includes flexibility in equipment load, flexibility in manning, flexibility in mobility, flexibility in tactics, and most important of all, flexibility in thinking. However, some PSCs in Iraq appear to be following one institutionalized **doctrinal approach** to PSDs and security operations in general. If this approach or model is based on corporate security operations in a permissive environment, it is definitely not be the best model for all situations in Iraq.

After the first attacks in Iraq, PSC personnel were quick to realize that 9mm primary weapons such as the MP-5 were inadequate in an open ambush scenario; a lesson that had to be re-learned from the Regiment's experience in Northern Ireland. This necessitated the adoption of AK47s for security work in Iraq which was a significant

departure from the western corporate image. Similarly, other aspects of the low-key corporate security model may not be applicable to operations in Iraq.

A good example of this is where most of the security providers are running a minimum of 3-vehicle PSDs, others are still running 2-vehicle movements. A 2-vehicle PSD would be the minimum in any **routine** security operation, but Baghdad and the surrounding region is considerably **more risky** than routine. The third CAT vehicle is essentially a dedicated fighting, blocking and ramming vehicle, there to shield the client's vehicle and to supply cover-fire for a break-contact drill or cross-deck hot extraction.

The best argument against the 2-vehicle PSD is where one vehicle is disabled in an ambush with a client on board, the second vehicle, which may also have a client on board is obliged to evacuate the surviving client and exit the kill zone. This leaves no additional vehicle to come to the rescue of the disabled vehicle.

PSCs need to adopt a more tactical and flexible approach to PSD operations to best match the changing threat and to meet the needs of client. Where in some circumstance a low profile 2-vehicle PSD may be appropriate, in others, a 3 or 4-vehicle PSD with full war-fighting load may be called for.

On the subject of personal weapons and equipment, one could pose the question that if you know you are going in harms way, and that there are terrorists possibly laying in wait along your route, what weapons would you select and how would you configure your personal kit? In most cases, former special forces operators would opt for an M4 or Colt Commando carbine, H&K 53 or cut down G3, and full fighting load. So while this is contrary to a low-profile policy, it should at least be an option on runs through high risk open areas and outside the city limits.

This comes back to the most basic principles of tactical planning and **matching the force to the mission**. If the force is too big it becomes slow and vulnerable; but if it is too small it is not able to defend itself or even break contact with a determined enemy.

In implementing this approach, the **protection package** may be flexible, but the basic equipment, weapons and contact drills remain standardized. However, when stepping up to this next level of security operations, it may require additional in-country training to bring all the individual operators up to speed. Major US contractors are running their personnel through intense theater-specific training before deploying to Iraq. The British companies may also wish to make their in-country training more robust to match the elevated threats.

There is a collateral advantage to more robust operations and that is confidence for the actual team members. Virtually everyone working PSD in 2004 is former military so has had the experience of kitting up in full war-fighting load for an operation. There is a routine and ritual that brings the team together and creates the right mindset for the impending risky operation. This same ritual and behavior pattern has been observed with several PSD teams in Iraq as they kit up for a hazardous run to or from Baghdad or to points further west or north. It has also been observed that the clients are not only fascinated by this pre-deployment ritual, they appear to gain assurance from knowing they are traveling under the protection of professional war-fighters and not just bodyguards.

PRACTICAL & FISCAL LIMITATIONS

There is however a number of practical and fiscal hurdles that needs to be negotiated when moving to a **more flexible force package** when running security operations. The first practical consideration is the need for a tactical operations center that is above and beyond a routine communication and coordination center.

A security tactical operations center (TOC) would require that the operations manager have a number of resources on-hand or on stand-by for rapid deployment. Only by having these resources on immediate stand-by can the operations manager match the security to the threat in an often rapidly changing environment. This would require some form of ready room or holding area from which PSD teams and QRFs could be launched.

On the fiscal level, this more flexible force packaging creates problems in pricing and billing the client. The cost of a specific movement or operation would be unpredictable since the force package would be selected just before the operation based on best intelligence and the operations manager's judgment. In some cases the client would receive a 2-vehicle PSD with 4 operators, but by adding a third "force option" CAT vehicle it could go to 3 vehicles and 7-8 operators.

So even though this may be the optimum method it may be impractical for fiscally conservative clients.

AIR OPERATIONS

Another option that is being under utilized in Iraq is helicopter supported operations. In both the construction industry and the security industry in the United States and other countries, helicopters have become a regular and daily part of operations. Clients landing at major airports are routinely moved to corporate centers or job sites by helicopter, by-passing both traffic congestion and ground threats.

Helicopters could be used in Iraq for movement of clients, route reconnaissance and aerial surveillance, but again, this creates issues with cost, maintenance and the risks associated with flying in military airspace.

If helicopters are an option or consideration, then the bulk of movements from predictable locations should be run at night for the protection of the air assets. However, the subject of deploying civilian helicopters to Iraq would require a feasibility study beyond the limited scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

The threat levels in Iraq have increased considerably since March 2004, and can be expected to continue to increase in the immediate future. Iraq will not become a safe permissive environment for foreign contractors any time soon.

With this in mind, there are a number of options open to PSCs when it comes to matching operational capabilities to elevated threats. However the process begins by

first acknowledging that the “peacetime corporate security model” is not the best for Iraq, and that there is no one model for all situations.

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