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

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PART 3

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Dated: June 2004 – Iraq

As with Parts 1 and 2, this paper is intended to create academic discussion of the tactical merits of increasing the fighting posture of protective security details in high-risk environments. It is not intended to make an argument for the “militarization” of the private security industry.

SITUATION

Most private security providers in Iraq are currently running PSD operations with armored SUVs ranging from low-profile Toyota Land Cruisers up to more obvious Chevy Suburbans, Ford Expeditions and large Excursions. Two options that have not yet been explored or adopted are the use of military vehicles or open-top armored vehicles.

When escorting convoys or high-value assets within Iraq, the military makes maximum use of up-armored Humvees, light armored vehicles (LAVs), or APCs equipped with crew-served weapons systems such as the GPMG, M240G, Mk-19 and M2 .50 caliber. This operational 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.

The obvious advantage of this methodology is that it offers immediate and aggressive counter-force and suppressive fire for a classic ambush break-contact drill.

ARMORED SPORT UTILITY VEHICLES (SUV)

Exactly as the name states, “sport utility”, SUVs were designed and manufactured as **sport** and **utility** vehicles. They were never designed by the manufacturer to be fighting vehicles. However, by modifying and armoring an SUV this vehicle becomes an adequate **defensive** security vehicle.

Even an unarmored SUV has several advantages over sedans and limousines for security work in that they give superior observation of the road ahead; have a ramming capability; have the ground clearance to jump curbs; and the 4-wheel drive capability to go off-road if necessary.

In addition, SUV's are well suited to heavy armoring since they come standard with heavy-duty suspensions, drive trains, transmissions and cooling systems. The engines are also more powerful and the vehicles routinely come with skid-plates to protect the under-carriage.

However, even though the SUVs can be up-armored, they are only suited to **defensive security** operations where the PSD's primary tactic is to accelerate or ram their way out of the kill zone. Since the windows usually do not wind down on the heavily armored SUVs, the PSD does have the option of aggressive counter-force or suppressive fire in a standard counter-ambush or break-contact drill. The only way the PSD can engage the enemy is if they open the doors or dismount to fight.

If they have not already realized it, insurgent guerrilla forces and terrorists in Iraq will soon realize that **they can shoot at armored SUVs with impunity** knowing that they **cannot shoot back**. No sane man or professionally trained PSD is going to stop or dismount in the kill zone to engage hostile gunmen, even if the PSD has superior numbers and firepower. Rule #1 will always be to accelerate or maneuver out of the kill zone and move the client off the X to a safer location as quickly and safely as possible.

However, as we have seen with a number of attacks against armored SUVs, the vehicles were incapacitated and the team forced to remain in their vehicles and take whatever the attackers fired at them. They were only fortunate that the attackers did not have RPGs or heavier armored-piercing weapons.

The attack on the PSD outside the Green Zone was another case where a vehicle was incapacitated by an explosion and was about to be over-run by hostile crowds. The rescue of the driver was only affected by the follow vehicle when the PSD **dismounted** to fire rounds to disperse the mob and discourage further aggression.

A second problem that has been encountered with fully enclosed SUVs and armored sedans is the issue of blast over-pressure. When a rocket propelled grenade (RPG) hits the body or windows of the vehicle, the internal blast over-pressure is often fatal. Even if the occupants are not hit with primary or secondary fragmentation or molten spalding, the internal pressure is sufficient to incapacitate or kill.

A third problem occurs when an SUV hits a mine or roadside IED. The resulting explosion can throw the vehicle vertically or sideways causing significant blunt trauma to the occupants when they come in contact with bulkheads, windows and overheads. When hitting landmines in particular, the occupants have been thrown against the roof of the vehicle so violently they have broken their necks and/or suffered spinal injuries. The same dynamic is in effect when the vehicle is thrown violently sideways.

These blunt-force trauma type injuries, and the very real threat of both mines and IED attacks in Iraq, make an excellent argument for the wearing of seatbelts. However, many PSDs do not wear seatbelts since they are considered a hassle when buckled over

heavy body-armor and load-bearing vests. They also create a problem when trying to extract a client or injured team mate from a vehicle in exigent circumstance.

THE MILITARY OPTION

One alternative to SUVs would be for private security providers, particularly those involved in ultra-high risk movements, to step up to mission-specific military vehicles that are specifically designed for war fighting.

Vehicles such as the Humvee (HMMWV – High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle) have all the attributes of an SUV and then some. The Humvee has the power, the suspension, the ground clearance, the ramming, and the off-road capability of an SUV – in fact, superior to an SUV. The Humvee also comes in a number of open- and closed-top body-styles to accommodate a variety of missions and applications.

In addition to the performance and heavier armoring options, the Humvee can also be fitted with a variety of weapons mounts for individual weapons systems and crew-served weapons. If utilized by a protective security team, the armored Humvee would then offer the option of aggressive counter-force and immediate enemy engagement to better effect a break-contact.

Although Humvees may not be the first choice of vehicle for transporting clients, especially those accustomed to the air-conditioned comfort of an SUV, they have several positive attributes when used as a lead or follow vehicle, dedicated escort fighting CAT vehicle, or as part of a QRF.

THE OPEN-TOP SUV OPTION

Somewhere between the fully enclosed armored civilian SUVs that are only suited to defensive operations, and the offensive armored military vehicles, is room for the development of low profile open-top armored SUVs.

The concept would be a standard armored SUV but with the roof removed front and rear seats, or a sliding hard-top convertible panel in the roof. In this manner, either the operator in the rear could stand up to observe from the open hatch or engage hostile targets. This would also allow for shooting to the rear in a pursuit situation, or the deployment of FBGs when confronted by a hostile crowd.

In looking back to the history of the Long Range Desert Groups, we can find a number of examples of civilian vehicles such as Chevy trucks and jeeps that had been converted to light-strike fighting vehicles. The British and Australian SAS has since up-dated that concept with their modified long wheel-based Land Rovers; and in Afghanistan the NZSAS quickly chopped the tops off of their leased Humvees to achieve the same purpose.

We have also observed in hot-spots around the world, such as Somalia, Sierra Leone and Haiti, where militia forces that could not afford or obtain military vehicles, had converted a variety of pick-up trucks into fighting vehicles called “technicals.” These

proved very effective and quite deadly for the militia units and equally troublesome for peacekeeping soldiers.

In the last few years, the US military has also shown an interest in developing special operations vehicles for a number of applications. The US Marine Force Recon teams currently utilize modified Mercedes G Wagons as light reconnaissance vehicles since they can be internally transported in their CH46 helicopters; and the US special operations community has put money into developing a fleet of modified SUVs for low-profile special forces applications.

Apart from the obvious speed, maneuverability and firepower, the concept of an armored open-top SUV would have a number of applications and advantages:

1. An open-top SUV would be more low-profile and draw less attention than a military Humvee or LAV.
2. An open-top vehicle would give the PSD an elevated observation position to better identify threats ahead on the road. With the current line of enclosed SUVs with tinted windows, the PSD has a very limited scope of observation.
3. This design would better allow the PSD to verbally communicate or signal to crowds, or deploy gas of FBGs if the crowd becomes hostile.
4. The open-top would give the PSD the opportunity to bring weapons to bear while still offering protection to the driver and other occupants.
5. This design would also allow for more aggressive counter-ambush drills, suppressing fire, and break-contact covering fire.
6. This type of vehicle would be better suited as the #3 CAT fighting or zone vehicle, and for doing rescues or working as a security QRF.
7. In the event of a direct RPG hit, much of the blast over-pressure would be vented through the open top.
8. In the event of hitting a landmine the occupants would not be thrown against the roof breaking their necks. However, the vehicle design should still incorporate a roll cage in the event of a roll-over from the explosion.

Although the advantages of this type of vehicle far out-weigh the disadvantages, the disadvantages should still be understood and discussed. These include:

1. The occupants are more exposed to the weather and elements, and in hot climates such as summer in Iraq, there is less comfort or opportunity to utilize air conditioning
2. The “gunner” or exposed occupants could be hit by sniper or small arms fire. This can be mitigated by not only removing the roof of the vehicle but maintaining the armored side windows and supports. Occupants should also wear PPE/helmets and crew-served weapons should be fitted with light shields.
3. There is greater opportunity for an attacker to drop a grenade into the vehicle if moving slowly or stuck in traffic.
4. Occupants could be thrown from the vehicle in the event of hitting a mine, however, this can also be a good thing.
5. Finally, there is a possible negative PR factor with private security adopting a more military appearance and role. However, this “fighting design” may also give the clients a greater sense of security knowing they have superior firepower and protection.

CONCLUSION

As the situation changes in Iraq and Baghdad, and if the threat level increases as intelligence indicates, some thought should be given to increasing the fighting capability of the private security protective details and convoy escorts.

In addition, the CPA and US military seem to be encouraging security providers to take on more hazardous assignments and contracts such as convoy escort from Jordan and Kuwait and movements all the way north to Mosul and Kirkuk.

Although there are no commercially manufactured vehicles of this design, it would be no great challenge to have SUVs modified to the above mission requirements. The only logistical considerations would be cost, weapons mounts, weapons systems and additional training for the PSDs. However, since most of the current PSDs are former military, this transition would be relatively simple.

Several companies in the United States and Europe have built design-prototypes of these types of vehicles for a variety of specialized military applications, so it would not be difficult to have these manufactured and shipped in about the same amount of time it would take to armor a conventional SUV to B6 standards. It would also be feasible to take existing vehicles in Iraq and modify the roof to meet the same design requirements.

To offset the potential for negative PR, and distance the PSC from this more military image, the use and manning of these types of vehicles must be accompanied by a public relations effort stressing the defensive nature of these vehicles and procedures. Just as the UN Blue Hats utilize tanks and APCs in a peacekeeping role so must security contractors utilize up-armored and up-gunned vehicles to protect their diplomats and clients. Without security there is no reconstruction; and with out reconstruction there will be no peace.

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