

A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S DEATH SQUADS

Well before the start of the insurgency in Syria in March 2011, US military-intelligence and government operatives had already laid the groundwork for recruiting and training death squads, their model based on their successful Salvador Option.

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Terrorism with a "Human Face": Roots of the Covert War on Syria

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 were modelled 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.

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, who was dispatched to Baghdad by the US State Department in June 2004 as "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 in overseeing the activities of the Honduran military death squads. Honduras's military government, ruled by General Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, was 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..."

"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 [C]ontras 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."

(See "El Salvador-style 'death squads' to be deployed by US against Iraq militants", Times Online, 10 January 2005; Global Research, 1 December 2006; 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 Shi'ite population. Of significance, the death squads were integrated and advised by undercover US Special Forces operatives.

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 US representative to the Shi'ite city of Najaf which was the stronghold of the Mahdi Army, with which he made preliminary contacts. In January 2005, Ford was appointed Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs at the US Embassy under 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.

Negroponte and Ford were put in charge of recruiting the Iraqi death squads. While Negroponte coordinated the operation from his office at the US Embassy, Ford, who was fluent in Arabic and Turkish, was entrusted with the task of establishing strategic contacts with Shi'ite and Kurdish militia groups outside the "Green Zone".

Two other embassy officials, Henry Ensher (Ford's deputy) and Jeffrey Beals (a younger official in the political

section) played important roles in the team's "talking to a range of Iraqis, including extremists". (See *The New Yorker*, 26 March 2007.) Another key individual in Negroponte's team was James Franklin Jeffrey, who was US Ambassador to Albania (2002–2004) and in 2010 was appointed US Ambassador to Iraq (2010–2012). Negroponte also brought into the team Colonel James Steele (Ret.), a collaborator from his Honduras heyday:

"Under the 'Salvador Option', Negroponte had assistance from his colleague from his days in Central America during the 1980s, 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 spiraled 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 US-backed sectarian violence which largely led to the hell-disaster that Iraq is today."

(See Dahr Jamail, "Managing Escalation", Antiwar.com, 9 January 2007; emphasis added.)

According to US Representative Dennis Kucinich, Colonel Steele was responsible for implementing

"a plan in El Salvador' under which tens of thousands [of] Salvadorans 'disappeared' or were murdered". Upon his appointment to Baghdad, Colonel Steele was assigned to a new counterinsurgency unit, the Special Police Commandos, under the Iraqi Interior Ministry.

(See Cuba News Agency, 6 June 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 Police Commandos, which were under the 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... An interview conducted by Maass [Peter 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... 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 counterinsurgency program was former New York City Police Commissioner Bernie Kerik, who in 2007 was

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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 organisation and training of the Iraqi Police. During his short stint in 2003, Bernie Kerik—who took on the position of interim Minister of Interior—worked towards organising terror units within the Iraqi Police: "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'...*"

(See Salon.com, 9 December 2004; emphasis added.)

Under Negro Ponte's helm at the US Embassy in Baghdad, a wave of covert civilian killings and targeted assassinations was unleashed. Engineers, medical doctors, scientists and intellectuals were also targeted.

Author and geopolitical analyst Max Fuller has documented the atrocities committed under the US-sponsored counterinsurgency program:

"The appearance of death squads was first highlighted in May this year [2005], when...dozens of bodies were found casually disposed of in rubbish dumps and 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."

(See Max Fuller, "Crying Wolf", Global Research, 10 November 2005.)

The Special Police Commandos as well as the Wolf Brigade were overseen by the US counterinsurgency program in Iraq's Ministry of 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."

"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[s] 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. 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."

(*ibid.*; emphasis added.)

This initial groundwork established under Negro Ponte 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 in 2008 as Deputy Chief of Mission.

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Operation "Syrian Contras": Learning from Iraq

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

The objective in Syria was to create factional divisions between Sunnis, Alawites, Shi'ites, 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 organised sectarian process of mass murder and

extrajudicial killings comparable to that conducted by the US-sponsored death squads in Iraq. People in Homs were routinely categorised as "prisoners" (Shi'ite, 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:

"Since last summer [2011], we have executed slightly fewer than 150 men, which represents about 20 percent of our prisoners," says Abu Rami [a Lebanese member of the Homs militia]... 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."

(See *Der Spiegel*, 30 March 2012; emphasis added.)

The project required an initial program of recruiting and training 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. Ford's appointment as Ambassador to Syria was announced in early 2010. Diplomatic relations had been cut in 2005 following Rafic Hariri's assassination, which Washington blamed on Syria. Ford arrived in Damascus barely two months before the onset of the insurgency.

The Free Syrian Army

Washington and its allies replicated in Syria the essential features of the "Iraq Salvador Option", leading to the creation of the Free Syrian Army and its various terrorist factions including the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra brigades. While the FSA's creation was announced in June 2011, the recruitment and training of foreign mercenaries was initiated much earlier.

In many regards, the FSA 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 organisations 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 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 forces from Turkey. These embedded special forces no doubt are 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, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (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 with rebel ranks.

(See "Private Security Companies in Syria...", *Global Research*, 20 June 2012.)

The Jabhat Al Nusra Front

The Al Nusra Front—which is said to be affiliated with Al Qaeda—is described as the most effective "opposition" rebel fighting group, responsible for several of the high-profile bomb attacks. Portrayed on the US Department of State's list of terrorist organisations as an

enemy of America, Al Nusra has operations which 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.

A reporter interviewing Al Nusra leader Abu Adnan in Aleppo discovered: "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."

(See "Interview with Official of Jabhat al-Nusra...", *Time* magazine, 25 December 2012.)

As in Iraq, factional violence and ethnic cleansing were actively promoted. In Syria, the Alawite, Shi'ite and

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Christian communities have been the target of the US–NATO-sponsored death squads. The Alawite and the Christian communities are the main targets of the assassination program. The Vatican news service confirmed:

"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', the text [by a Greek-Catholic priest in Aleppo] concludes."

(See Agenzia Fides, 19 October 2012.)

"The Sunni Salafist militants [according to Greek-Catholic priest Philip Tournyol Clos who visited Syria from France] ... 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."

(See Agenzia Fides, 4 June 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 *jihād* (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."

(See DEBKAFfile, "NATO to give rebels anti-tank weapons", 14 August 2011)

Private Security Companies and Mercenaries

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

(See "A Secret Army of Mercenaries", Global Research, 24 May 2011)

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..."

(See CNN Report, 9 December 2012; emphasis added.)

The names of the companies involved were not revealed.

Behind Closed Doors at DoS

Robert Stephen Ford was part of a small team at the US Department of State which oversaw the recruitment and training of terrorist brigades. So were Frederic C. Hof, a former business partner of Richard Armitage who served as Washington's "Special Coordinator on Syria", and Derek Chollet, who has recently been appointed Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ISA). This team operated under the helm of Jeffrey Feltman, former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.

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 600 Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) troops to Syria, via Turkey, in the months following the September 2011 collapse of the Gaddafi government.

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 as 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, 12 May 2012.)

In June 2012, Jeffrey Feltman was appointed UN Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, a strategic position

In Syria, the Alawite, Shi'ite and Christian communities have been the target of the US–NATO-sponsored death squads.

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which, in practice, consists of 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 earmarked 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 Brahimi's "peace proposal".

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

America's 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 in Syria by the US-NATO death squads are casually blamed on the government of Bashar Al Assad. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 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",

Global Research, 2 January 2012)

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

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This is Prof. Chossudovsky's sixth article in NEXUS, the previous one being "America's Looming Fiscal and Social Collapse" (16/03). The complete article with hyperlinked references is accessible at <http://tinyurl.com/atojyp7>.

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