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Israel trains US assassination squads in Iraq

Julian Borger in Washington

Tuesday December 9, 2003

[The Guardian](#)

Israeli advisers are helping train US special forces in aggressive counter-insurgency operations in Iraq, including the use of assassination squads against guerrilla leaders, US intelligence and military sources said yesterday.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has sent urban warfare specialists to Fort Bragg in North Carolina, the home of US special forces, and according to two sources, Israeli military "consultants" have also visited Iraq.

US forces in Iraq's Sunni triangle have already begun to use tactics that echo Israeli operations in the occupied territories, sealing off centres of resistance with razor wire and razing buildings from where attacks have been launched against US troops.

But the secret war in Iraq is about to get much tougher, in the hope of suppressing the Ba'athist-led insurgency ahead of next November's presidential elections.

US special forces teams are already behind the lines inside Syria attempting to kill foreign jihadists before they cross the border, and a group focused on the "neutralisation" of guerrilla leaders is being set up, according to sources familiar with the operations.

"This is basically an assassination programme. That is what is being conceptualised here. This is a hunter-killer team," said a former senior US intelligence official, who added that he feared the new tactics and enhanced cooperation with Israel would only inflame a volatile situation in the Middle East.

"It is bonkers, insane. Here we are - we're already being compared to Sharon in the Arab world, and we've just confirmed it by bringing in the Israelis and setting up assassination teams."

"They are being trained by Israelis in Fort Bragg," a well-informed intelligence source in Washington said.

"Some Israelis went to Iraq as well, not to do training, but for providing consultations."

The consultants' visit to Iraq was confirmed by another US source who was in contact with American officials there.

The Pentagon did not return calls seeking comment, but a military planner, Brigadier General Michael Vane, mentioned the cooperation with Israel in a letter to Army

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magazine in July about the Iraq counter-insurgency campaign.

"We recently travelled to Israel to glean lessons learned from their counterterrorist operations in urban areas," wrote General Vane, deputy chief of staff at the army's training and doctrine command.

An Israeli official said the IDF regularly shared its experience in the West Bank and Gaza with the US armed forces, but said he could not comment about cooperation in Iraq.

"When we do activities, the US military attaches in Tel Aviv are interested. I assume it's the same as the British. That's the way allies work. The special forces come to our people and say, do debrief on an operation we have done," the official said.

"Does it affect Iraq? It's not in our interest or the American interest or in anyone's interest to go into that. It would just fit in with jihadist prejudices."

Colonel Ralph Peters, a former army intelligence officer and a critic of Pentagon policy in Iraq, said yesterday there was nothing wrong with learning lessons wherever possible.

"When we turn to anyone for insights, it doesn't mean we blindly accept it," Col Peters said. "But I think what you're seeing is a new realism. The American tendency is to try to win all the hearts and minds. In Iraq, there are just some hearts and minds you can't win. Within the bounds of human rights, if you do make an example of certain villages it gets the attention of the others, and attacks have gone down in the area."

The new counter-insurgency unit made up of elite troops being put together in the Pentagon is called Task Force 121, New Yorker magazine reported in yesterday's edition.

One of the planners behind the offensive is a highly controversial figure, whose role is likely to inflame Muslim opinion: Lieutenant General William "Jerry" Boykin.

In October, there were calls for his resignation after he told a church congregation in Oregon that the US was at war with Satan, who "wants to destroy us as a Christian army".

"He's been promoted a rank above his abilities," he said. "Some generals are pretty good on battlefield but are disastrous nearer the source of power."

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