Iraqi, foreign activists work to end privatization of warfare

Activists from around the world came together in Basra over the weekend to involve more Iraqis in holding private military and security companies (PMSCs) accountable for their human rights abuses.

On Sept. 16, 2007, Blackwater contractors killed 17 civilians and wounded 24 others in a shooting in Nisoor Square in Baghdad.

Those involved, by paying off the families of the victims, skirted punishment for their actions. No legal suits were filed, no trials were held. And just like that, the matter of gunning down 41 citizens was discreetly dusted under the proverbial rug of the PMSCs.

One incident is egregious enough, but such human rights abuses are business as usual for private companies working in a vacuum of law. Blackwater was involved in 195 other incidents involving “aggressive tactics” in Baghdad, Najaf, Mosul and Arbil between 2005 and 2007. But Blackwater is not alone.

“Everyone knows about Blackwater at Nisoor Square, but there are many other cases [and by other PMSCs] that are simply and intentionally forgotten,” said Felipe Daza Sierra, the co-director of the International Institute for Nonviolent Action (NOVACT) and coordinator of “The Privatization of Warfare, Violence and Private Military and Security Companies” project, addressing on Sunday in Basra a room brimming with Iraqi and foreign civil society representatives alike.

The project, compiled by NOVACT in collaboration with European and Iraqi field researchers and released during the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in December 2011, extensively analyzed the activities, benefits and human rights abuses of 116 companies contracted to provide military and security services between 2003 and 2010 in Iraq. NOVACT cooperated with the UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries while researching the impact of PMSCs on the Iraqi people and presented its findings to the group in Geneva last year.

“The privatization of war is a new international phenomenon,” Sierra said of the boom in the last decade of the use of PMSCs in places of armed conflict, especially by the US and the UK. “The case of Iraq, though, is especially interesting.”

Iraq is the hottest spot for PMSCs around the world. Many of them came with
the invasion and occupation of US forces in 2003.

The NOVACT report found PMSCs now carry out activities that were traditionally the job of the country in conflict, including armed operations to guard facilities and the interrogations of prisoners. A growing number are even being used for domestic security, such as prison administration and prisoner transport.

According to Sierra and NOVACT’s findings, this move toward the privatization of military and security operations has mushroomed to such massive proportions that it threatens the sovereignty of the country in conflict and, in turn, its government’s ability to ensure its citizens’ fundamental human rights. Iraq, along with Afghanistan, has witnessed many of the most devastating cases of abuse by PMSCs, including torture, sexual assault, indiscriminate killing of civilians and the suppression of workers’ rights. Rarely are these incidents properly investigated, shielding the PMSCs from scrutiny and perpetuating the cycle of these human rights violations.

“Did you know that, in addition to violating human rights, a staff member in security can make $1,500 per day?” Sierra asked the now clearly disgruntled crowd before him.

“Nations must drastically reduce their reliance on PMSCs,” he told Today’s Zaman of NOVACT’s demands. “They must end all outsourcing and the delegation of inherently state functions. That is where the problems begin.” Because the international community has failed to respond, Sierra said the campaign demands a legally binding, international convention to oblige states to regulate PMSCs’ activities, end private contractor impunity and provide avenues of redress for the victims of their abuses.

During one of the three-day forum’s breakout sessions, Sierra laid out the findings of NOVACT’s report to Iraqi civil society for the first time in hopes of brainstorming with and mobilizing local activists, journalists, lawyers and academics in cracking down on PMSCs in their country.

“We’re not aiming to forbid these PMSCs from operating,” Sierra stressed, adding, “We just want to monitor and hold them responsible for their actions, especially when they infringe on your human rights.”

During working groups to determine an action plan, Iraqi activists suggested working with human rights organizations, prominent journalists and victims of PMSCs to raise awareness and organize the Iraqi public on the exigent issue. The meeting ended with activists, including a group called the Social Police, signing up to join the international campaign.

But a high-ranking member of a labor union in Basra told Sierra “we must be more optimistic,” because the number of PMSCs has fallen since the start of the withdrawal of US troops in 2008.
While Sierra acknowledged most of the human rights violations took place between 2003 and 2007 and that the number of incidents have decreased since the withdrawal, he stressed the importance of bringing past abuses to light so they are not repeated. "There are still many PMSCs operating in Iraq, and they are providing services which only the government can provide," he said.

American peace activist and member of the Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative (ICSSI) Terry Rockefeller added: "The people of Afghanistan today are suffering the same way Iraqis did during the occupation. If we don’t address the abuses of the past, these companies will not be held to the rule of law."

As a peace activist working against war and trying to develop alternatives to conflict resolution, the co-chair of the Foundation for Social Defense in Germany, Stephan Brues, believes that taking a closer look at those who are profiting from war is crucial.

Brues, who attended the 2009 forum in Arbil, advocates against the very existence of PMSCs but is “also realistic enough to see this sort of campaigning is the right way to address the problem.”

While he found the workshop effective and the Iraqi participants engaged, Brues thinks he and his Iraqi counterparts are on different pages. “My impression is that the Iraqis have problems with international PMSCs but not with local ones. My position is very different.”

The ICSSI, of which NOVACT is a member organization, and the Iraqi Nonviolence Group (LAONF) teamed up in organizing the second Iraqi Nonviolence Forum. In addition to NOVACT’s international campaign to control PMSCs, other ICSSI campaigns discussed and evaluated on Sunday included the protection of the Tigris River and Iraqi marshes, the use of sports against violence, the promotion of transparency in the Iraqi oil industry and building solidarity with Iraqi labor unions.

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Muhabir: ALYSON NEEL