

‘Blackwater Mercenaries’ Are Fighting For Saudi Arabia In Yemen

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Saudi Arabia has been using paid mercenaries from around the world to gain a competitive edge in its failing offensive in Yemen, including, according to a Yemeni Army Spokesman, the infamous BlackWater.



Private military contractors have been an integral part of Saudi Arabia's strategy to win its ground war in Yemen, something the inexperienced Saudi military has been unable to accomplish.
(Khalid Mohammed/AP)

SANAA, Yemen — A spokesman for the Yemeni army told Russian media that hundreds of mercenaries are fighting in his country on behalf of Saudi Arabia and its allies.

“They hire poor people from around the world to take part in the hostilities. Among them are Somalis and people from Sudanese tribes,” Brig. Gen. Sharaf Ghalib Luqman told the state-operated Russian news agency RIA Novosti, according to [a Jan. 19 report from Sputnik](#), the agency’s international arm.

“However, there are also Europeans, Americans, Colombians. These are contractors from a structure known as Blackwater. This division includes around 400 people.”

The private security firm formerly known as Blackwater Worldwide became notorious for providing thousands of mercenaries to the U.S. war in Iraq, some of whom were later implicated in war crimes. In September 2007, Blackwater mercenaries opened fire at an Iraqi checkpoint, killing 17, in what would become known as the Nisour Square massacre. [Four former Blackwater employees were convicted](#) of the killings in October 2014.

Despite Luqman’s assertions, the employers of the mercenaries fighting in Yemen remain somewhat unclear. Blackwater became Xe Services in 2009. Following a company restructuring and change in ownership, the company was renamed

the Academi in 2011. At that time, founder Erik Prince officially left the company but retained the rights to the name Blackwater.

A Dec. 10 report from Iran's PressTV, citing Yemeni news sources, claimed that " [15 Blackwater foreign fighters](#)" were killed in clashes with Houthi forces, who currently control the Yemeni government. PressTV reported that "[80 Saudi-led troops, including 42 Blackwater mercenaries](#)," were killed in a ballistic missile attack on Dec. 13. And a [Jan. 31 report](#) claimed that a "Blackwater commander," Nicholas Petros, "was killed along with a group of mercenaries fighting for the Saudi regime in its war on Yemen."

[Kane Hippisley-Gatherum](#), writing in December for Middle Eastern news site Al Bawaba, noted that the Academi's website makes no mention of these recent deaths, although [press releases have been issued when other mercenaries are killed](#). Hippisley-Gatherum suggests that the mercenaries were hired from another global security corporation by an ally of the Saudis in their war against the Houthis:

"A company called Reflex Responses (R2) reportedly had the contract with the UAE, and Prince does not own or run that company. He did, however, work to oversee the efforts to train and recruit troops. The New York Times reported last month that Prince has left his role in the UAE program several years ago.

... [I]t appears evident that 'Blackwater' troops did not recently die in Yemen.

The UAE recently deployed hundreds of its mercenaries, many of them Colombian, to fight in Yemen. The New York Times reported that it was the first combat deployment of the private army which Prince helped set up with R2."

Ultimately, Hippisley-Gatherum concludes: "Press TV may have reported that they were with Blackwater, but given that the company in charge is actually R2, and that Prince allegedly doesn't hold a role there anymore, that is clearly not the case."

Regardless of who issues their paychecks, it does seem clear from multiple media reports that foreign mercenaries are fighting — and dying — in Yemen. Their deaths are part of a bloody conflict that's also claimed the lives of at least 6,000 people, including [over 2,800 Yemeni civilians](#), since the Saudi-led war began in March 2015.