

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

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MARK ERBEL, AUG 18 2011

When asking about the role of private contractors in the so-called “War on Terror”, one has to be careful not to fall for the sensationalism which envelops much of the public debate on military outsourcing. This means keeping a focus on the structural and systematic rather than the individual, anecdotal evidence of contractor involvement in military affairs. It also means pointing out the large breadth of outsourced responsibilities, as the majority of contractors are unarmed and tasked with relatively mundane tasks unlike the image regularly conveyed by the press.

However, just because contractors do not regularly participate in “black ops” or other militarily more sensational operations, which are typically associated with war (and all the more so with the “War on Terror”) and disproportionately reported in the media, does not mean that they are inconsequential for the conduct of this war – quite the contrary. As this paper argues, what has begun as the “War on Terror” and is now a series of overseas contingency operations could in fact only go on in the global fashion that it did for almost ten years now *because* of the services provided by several hundred thousand contractors. In short, private contractors serve as enablers of this decade-old war, much like they have become enablers of most major Western militaries.

The Weight of Words – Sensitive Terminology

That the same person may be named a “terrorist” by one, a “freedom fighter” by another, is well-known. The interpretation of facts creates new ones. Accordingly, Louise Richardson stated that it was not 9/11 that changed the world, but the reaction to it. A short period of deep reflection followed the attacks, but was quickly suppressed by public discourse which focused on the reaction and the understandable desire to retaliate.[1]

Therefore, the force of words has to be kept in mind when addressing the “War on Terror” which ensued following the 9/11 attacks and is now called “overseas contingency operations”. [2] Lending credence to Bacevich’s assessment of a “new American militarism”, the response was designed and dubbed the “Global War on Terror”. [3] What one may call “franchise terrorism”, such as that perpetrated by groups like Al Qaida in the Arab Peninsula, testifies to the ability of such groups to understand and play the name and narrative games and draw in particular the US military’s attention to them whether they are in the Sahara, Somalia, Yemen, or Pakistan – the “global” designation may well have contributed to an equally global “terrorist” flare-up of violence. [4]

Furthermore, in need of clarification is the terminology attached to the private military and security industry. Unlike what is commonly written, the contractors working for the western militaries involved in the wider “War on Terror” are not mercenaries. They do not meet the UN’s or the Geneva Conventions’ definitions of the term. Furthermore, the vast majority is unarmed at all times. This does not distract from the fact that there have been a plethora of lethal or otherwise violent incidents, fraud or other problems involving private contractors – but by labelling them mercenaries the debate loses quality, and risks both diverting attention from the fact that there are also transgressions by members of the military, and being cut short. After all, why debate outsourcing at all if all it is was hiring mercenaries? Properly understanding military outsourcing requires deeper analysis. A focus on arguably unrepresentative “bad guys” highlights some problems of outsourcing policy, but it does not cater to a more comprehensive analysis.

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

The “War on Terror” – Unsuitable for 1990s Military Force Structures

Following 9/11, attention quickly focused on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which had harboured much of the Al Qaida leadership, training camps, and in particular Osama bin Laden. Thus, with the advent of a military response, Afghanistan became the first locus of the “War on Terror”, soon to be followed by the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and eventually and increasingly by the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Nonetheless, it is feasible to focus on Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan for the purposes of this paper, as they involve the largest military and contractor participation. There are, however, also missions being carried out in Somalia and Yemen in particular and elsewhere more generally. A considerable corollary of the global geography as well as the comprehensive goals of the “War on Terror” as defined by the first administration of US President George W. Bush in the National Security Strategy, should be stressed here: the war would require considerable resources, manpower, and intelligence in order to succeed.[5]

These requirements were difficult to meet for the US military and most others involved. Their force structure – though under reform since the end of the Cold War – still resembled more the large standing armies of the superpower confrontation which were best suited for symmetrical warfare. Demobilisation since 1990/91, reduced defence budgets, and a general presumption of the onset of a new peaceful age essentially resulted in stress for the armed forces in terms of supplies and capacity as this new peace failed to materialise, and more so for this war which posed an additional strategic challenge because of its asymmetry. Among the many solutions intended to overcome budgetary and strategic pressures as well as declining capacities, the outsourcing of military responsibilities – primarily support and other services deemed to be “non-core” – ruled supreme.[6] Over the past few years, intelligence has moreover experienced the largest growth in the sector of outsourcing formerly publicly executed tasks.

Furthermore, given the asymmetry of the war, the relatively small-scale fighting (for much of the time), the role of winning over the public in “counterinsurgency” warfare, and the blurring of the lines between civilian areas and the battlefield, led to close proximity between the military and civilian populations. Additionally and consequently, there arose the need to maintain a low profile when active in so many, often civilian or otherwise sensitive areas; simultaneously, there was need for capabilities to directly observe or interact with civilians and enemy combatants throughout the country – i.e. in particular a language requirement on the ground. Combined with the preceding description of limited military capacities, contractors stepped in to take over support tasks and eventually much of intelligence so that the regular militaries could concentrate their efforts on combat and maintain a reduced military footprint. Besides affecting military professionalism,[7] contractors maintain a lower profile on the ground,[8] and are less costly politically to deploy as they are not counted in parliamentary or otherwise decided-upon deployment caps, let alone in casualty counts.[9]

Contractorisation in the “War on Terror”

Security in Iraq and Afghanistan

When the “Coalition of Willing”, primarily the USA and the UK, invaded Iraq in 2003, contractors were already stationed in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Gulf and eventually followed the military troops into the country. In the USA, the company KBR was notified that within nine weeks it would have to expand a military camp in Kuwait– before the war had begun.[10] As Kinsey amply describes, the security vacuum that followed the invasion of Iraq – due to small troop numbers, false assumptions about the Iraqi population’s reaction to the invasion, the dissolution of all armed and police services without adequate replacement of own troop numbers, and non-materialised local networks by exile Iraqis, notably Ahmed Chalabi – was quickly closed as much as possible by thousands of security contractors.[11]

This also applies to the security surrounding reconstruction as well as protecting the various supply chains in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Illustrating the many facets of such security outsourcing is the security of British logistics contractors. They are protected by the military only in military bases. They thus have to make their own arrangements for protection e.g. when moving supplies to or between bases.[12] Such arrangements are so far determined only by

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

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the contractor and may include paying off local warlords, hiring PSCs, or relying on close relatives to join them on the road.[13] In an interview in June 2011, a British Lt Col and professional logistician cited a recent study which claims that the mission in Iraq could have been over two years sooner had there not been the unchecked reliance on PSCs in the wake of the invasion.[14] Besides the obvious high cost of two years of occupation – when recalling the need to win over the host country’s public’s support – such practice is counterproductive and puts many people at higher risk than necessary. The many commissions and government reports in the USA and Britain testify to the governments’ (and the industry’s high-end companies’) acknowledgement of the need to reform outsourcing practice, especially regarding security, and security provision in conflict areas more generally.[15]

Similarly, the diplomatic security service of the US State Department underwent considerable downsizing in recent years. Current estimates suggest that the State Department will hire as many as 5,000 private security guards for service in Iraq alone.[16] Without them, the countrywide diplomatic presence of the USA would be impossible to sustain after the withdrawal of combat troops from the country at the end 2011.

Although much of the defence market had so far been in the hands of US American companies, British companies such as Erinys, Aegis, and ArmorGroup got considerable shares of these contracts in Iraq. Erinys was hired for training and “Oil Protection Force”, while ArmorGroup won a contract for protecting convoys. Furthermore, then-newly founded Aegis was hired to provide security details, and to coordinate and monitor reconstruction-contractor and soldier movements so as to maximise synergies, reduce the need for patrols, and thereby facilitate information-sharing between the various active players.[17] Other companies trained the renewed armed and police services.

In Afghanistan,[18] development projects routinely hire either security contractors and/or are forced to pay armed opposition groups for security so as to be able to do their work.[19] As in Iraq, the training of the country’s new police and armed forces has been outsourced to some of the major companies in the field, e.g. MPRI and Raytheon. Linguistic services, diplomatic security and others are similarly present in Afghanistan, although there is a stronger focus than in Iraq on the numerous development projects.

Although the above is little more than an indication, it becomes clear that security contractors were essential for the occupying forces in their attempts to maintain security in Iraq and Afghanistan. Filling these requirements with uniformed personnel would have required considerably larger contingents to be deployed at much higher political cost – given the low popularity in particular of the war in Iraq it is obvious that contractors therefore not only filled a security vacuum in the country, but also reduced the political cost especially in the USA, as neither contractors nor – importantly – the considerable number of fallen contractors were officially counted.[20]

Intelligence Services

Given the sector’s trade, researching it is particularly difficult because secrecy is paramount. Nonetheless, more and more is being written about outsourcing intelligence services.[21] Extreme examples such as Blackwater Guards being involved in secret CIA raids or others collecting intelligence for track-and-kill operations of suspected militants in the border areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan make it to the press, as do reports about contractor involvement in secret CIA prisons or alleged torture.[22] They indicate the operational problems that occur when outsourcing is not sufficiently controlled, as well as the organisationally integral role contractor occupy.

Some numbers are, however, more interesting to assess the systematic role of contracting: up to 70% of expenditures are now paid on contracts, and in some of the major intelligence agencies (including the CIA and National Counterterrorism Center NCTC) contractors make up the majority (up to 70%) of the workforce. From data gathering to processing, analysing, and interpreting, private contractors are involved in most stages of the intelligence cycle – jobs that many of them used to hold as public employees before joining the private sector to the same for better pay but less job security.[23] Even critical accounts of intelligence outsourcing note, that “intelligence activities conducted by private contractors are indispensable in the Global War on Terrorism”.[24]

Linguistic services are another large segment of the industry. At Abu Ghraib, several of the interrogators and interpreters at the prison came from private companies, including some of those implicated by the scandal.[25]

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

Overall, besides this extreme example, interpreters in Iraq number many thousands, with Titan/L-3 alone accounting for around 7,000.[26] Needless to say, such numbers could never have been met by the armed services alone (it would have been unlikely even for the formerly self-sufficient military).

While this does not mean that contractors necessarily make the critical decisions in the intelligence community, it does, nonetheless, indicate that throughout the intelligence cycle individuals from the private sector (which means a higher likelihood of private interests and until now less oversight) have a considerable influence on the intelligence which eventually forms the basis for decision-making at the higher levels of the state bureaucracies.[27] This also means that private actors are increasingly aware of the whole formerly state-run process. It also suggests that without contractors, the intelligence agencies would have to either severely scale back their activities or to hire considerable numbers of employees. While the former is unthinkable in this war which depends on intelligence, the latter would be highly unpopular in the political environment in particular of the USA and the UK, where the public sector is already deemed as too large and facing severe cuts in manpower. Thus, contracting out meant having their cake (small numbers of public sector employees) and eating it too (maintaining large-scale intelligence capacities) – in short, enabling the intelligence agencies to work at the scale expected of them.

Support Services

Accounts like that of Kinsey (2009) demonstrate the breadth and ramifications of logistics outsourcing. Logistics has been reconfigured to include contractors into the force structure and planning process, epitomised by the permanent presence of contractors at the British Permanent Jointed Headquarters.[28] Overall, logistics has been outsourced to the highest degree in comparison to other areas of military responsibilities.

Contracting out supply primarily allows for a higher ratio of combat to non-combat military personnel to be deployed. In cases such as the UK, US, or Germany, where numbers are capped by parliament or announced by the Prime Minister, any increase would mean a high investment of political capital. According to the Royal Army's Lt. Col., the British total force employed in Afghanistan numbers approximately 16,000, of which about 6,000 are (mostly) logistics contractors. Of the 10,000 members of the military, only about one quarter are tasked with support services, so that the remaining 75% can concentrate on combat. The fire power of the British contingent has therefore been increased by outsourcing non-combat functions. Replacing the contractor work force of approximately six thousand would in fact require the deployment of at least 1,000 soldiers more than contractors, because their standards of protection are higher. Thus, the economic imperative as well as political restrictions on troop numbers combined to create this result on the ground.

Further supporting this paper's key argument, these numbers illustrate the enabler-function that contractors hold in these wars which are central components of the “War on Terror”.

Conclusions

As Moshe Schwartz from the Congressional Research Service describes, the percentage of contractors of the total workforce employed by the US Department of Defense is at over 50% in Afghanistan and at nearly 50% in Iraq.[29] Considering that much of the work done by these contractors would have been conducted by full-time military personnel in the Cold War, it becomes amply clear that this private workforce is not only critically important for mission success for the militaries involved, but also no less than an enabler of the globally wide-reaching military ambition which began as the “War on Terror” and is now called a series of “Overseas Contingency Operations”. It reduces the need for public forces and potentials. At the heart of the matter is a question of political will: hire sufficient numbers of publicly employed professionals and risk exposure to hostile, anti-“big government” politics, or outsource to the market to fill the gaps which arise from the lack of public employment and risk (at least until now) high prices and weak oversight?[30] As pointed out above, the current policy resembles a “having their cake and eating it too” experiment, i.e. downsizing the publicly employed (and therefore counted) armed services while nonetheless conducting military operations on a global scale.

Even without relying on rogue armed contractors or other sensational stories, but by in fact focusing on more

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

mundane examples, this paper has shown the centrality of contractor support to the conduct of the “War on Terror”. Logistics, supply chains and so on may appear less exciting than street rowdies shooting civilians, but while the latter is an exceptional occurrence with little general validity, the former has become standard fare and a central, systemic enabling factor for global military deployments.

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Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

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[1] Louise Richardson (2007), *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Terrorist Threat* (London: John Murray), p. 167.

[2] On naming see Michael V. Bhatia (2005), “Fighting Words: naming terrorists, bandits, rebels and other violent actors”, in *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 5-22. While the fight has not changed, the fact that the official term has changed is indicative of this force of words.

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

On renaming the war “Overseas Contingency Operations”, see e.g. Oliver Burkeman, “Obama administration says goodbye to ‘war on terror’”, in *Guardian* (25 March 2009, online edition), available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/25/obama-war-terror-overseas-contingency-operations> (last accessed 06 August 2011).

[3] Andrew J. Bacevich (2005), *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press). Bacevich is a self-described religious and cultural conservative, which may come as a surprise when comparing his biting criticism with the opinion of others in the US mainstream who label themselves as such. Regarding the War on Terror, he consequently asserts that the current war is in fact a continuation of a long process of continuous crisis and conflict since World War II. See Andrew J. Bacevich (2008), “Introduction”, in *The Long War: a New History of U.S. National Security Policy since World War II*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. vii-xiv, at p. xi.

[4] One should not overlook the fact, that the US had already long claimed global reach and responsibility, epitomised for example in President Bill Clinton’s “Operation Infinite Reach” following the 1998 US Embassy Bombings in Kenya and Tanzania.

[5] For a comprehensive list of the goals, see The White House (February 2003), *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, pp. 15-28, available under https://www.cia.gov/news-information/cia-the-war-on-terrorism/Counter_Terrorism_Strategy.pdf (last accessed on 06 August 2011).

[6] For historical overviews over the outsourcing of military responsibilities, see Christopher Kinsey (2006), *Corporate Soldiers and International Security: The Rise of Private Military Companies* (London: Routledge); Deborah D. Avant (2005), *The Market for Force: the Consequences of Privatizing Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); and Peter W. Singer (2008), *Corporate Warriors: the Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, upd. ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press).

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[7] See e.g. Lt. Col. William C. Latham Jr. (2009), “Not My Job: Contracting and Professionalism in the U.S. Army”, in *Military Review*, March-April 2009, pp. 40-49.

[8] See e.g. Erik Prince, founder of Blackwater, who was secretly recorded saying regarding operating in sensitive areas: “You’re not going to solve it by putting a lot of uniformed soldiers in all these countries. It’s way too politically sensitive. The private sector can operate there with a very, very, very small, very light footprint.” Reported by *Democracy Now!* on 04 May 2010, available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/5/4/exclusivesecret_recording_of_erik_prince_reveals (last accessed 07 August 2011).

[9] See in particular Steven L. Schooner (2008), “Why Contractor Fatalities Matter”, in *Parameters*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 78-91, and Steven L. Schooner & Collin D. Swan (2010), “Contractors and the Ultimate Sacrifice”, in *Service Contractor*, September 2010, pp. 16-18.

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[11] See Kinsey (2009). Re the spat between Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Shinseki, see e.g. Matthew Moten (2009), ‘A Broken Dialogue: Rumsfeld, Shinseki, and Civil-Military Tension’, in Suzanne C. Nielsen, Don M. Snider, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), pp. 42-71.

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

[12] What remains underrepresented in the media are the considerable threats that contractors face. According to the Lt. Col. cited below, logistics contractors suffer around 180 casualties per year. Wikileaks has also revealed that many of the attacks on contractors that were reported involved contracted supply trucks.

[13] The situation is similar for the USA. See among others U.S. House of Representatives (June 2010), *Warlord Inc.: Extortion and Corruption along the U.S. Supply Chain in Afghanistan* for a public report on the downside of the security governance as it currently exists in Afghanistan.

[14] Interview conducted with British Lt. Col., June 2011.

[15] See amongst other the British “Tiger Team Report” and the US American “Commission on Wartime Contracting”.

[16] According to Patrick Kennedy, top State Department official for contractor oversight, as quoted in Tom Bowman (2011), “As U.S. Military Exits Iraq, Contractors to Enter”, in *NPR Morning Edition*, 17 May 2011, available at <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/17/136357821/as-u-s-military-exits-iraq-contractors-to-enter> (last accessed on 06 August 2011). 5,000 is the typical size of a NATO brigade.

[17] See among others Kinsey (2009), pp.79-87.

[18] For a concise overview over contractor use in Afghanistan, see David Perry (2010), “ISAF, Inc? Private Military and Security Companies and the Afghan ‘Surge’”, *Paper prepared for the ISA 51st Annual Convention*, February 2010, New Orleans.

[19] See the aforementioned report *Warlord Inc.*. For a shorter introduction, see long-term observer of the industry David Isenberg (2010), “Taliban to PSC: How May we Serve You?”, in *Huffington Post*, 01 October 2010, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-isenberg/taliban-to-psc-how-may-we_b_747821.html (last accessed on 06 August 2011).

[20] See Schooner (2008).

[21] See in particular Simon Chesterman (2008), “‘We Can’t Spy... If We Can’t Buy!’: The Privatization of Intelligence and the Limits of Outsourcing ‘Inherently Governmental Functions’”, in *The European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 1055-1074. See also Pratap Chatterjee (2008), “Outsourcing Intelligence in Iraq: A CorpWatch Report on L-3/Titan”, updated report with recommendations from *Amnesty International*.

[22] See e.g. James Risen & Mark Mazzetti (11 December 2009), “Blackwater Guards Tied to Secret C.I.A. Raids”, in *The New York Times*, and Dexter Filkins & Mark Mazzetti (14 March 2010), “Contractors Tied to Effort to Track and Kill Militants”, in *The New York Times*.

[23] See Tim Shorrock (1 June 2007), *The Corporate Takeover of U.S. Intelligence*, in *Salon.com*, available at http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/06/01/intel_contractors/ (last accessed 06 August 2011).

[24] Vinh Nguyen (2007), “Current Trends in Intelligence Outsourcing Affect Work Force Stability”, in *SIGNAL Magazine*, December 2007. Nguyen is an analyst in the US Department of Defense.

[25] See the internal US Army report, US Army (2004), “Article 15-6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade”.

[26] See Chatterjee (2008), p. 5.

[27] See Shorrock (2007), or various entries at the website of intelligence analyst R. J. Hillhouse, *The Spy Who Billed Me*. As a result, debates about what are “inherently governmental functions” – and consequently not suitable for outsourcing – are currently widespread. See e.g. Chesterman (2008).

Contractors in the “War on Terror”: Enabling Global Military Deployment

Written by Mark Erbel

[28] Kinsey (2009), p. 98.

[29] Moshe Schwartz (2 July 2010), “Department of Defense Contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan: Background and Analysis”, *CRS Report for Congress*, 7-5700.

[30] It should be said here, that increasingly many companies and trade organisation themselves actively push for industry regulation, as they risk to lose future business due to the negative image the industry holds because of the negative stories of fraud or abuse committed mostly by lower-quality companies.

Mark Erbel is a doctoral candidate at the Department of War Studies, King’s College London. His thesis addresses the effects of military outsourcing on policy-making. He holds an MA in International Relations (King’s College London, 2:1), and a BA in History (major), Middle Eastern Studies, and English (minors) (Free University of Berlin, distinction).