

Military Contractors Belie Myth of US Leaving Afghanistan and Iraq

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The four Blackwater security contractors responsible for the infamous 2007 killing of 17 civilian Iraqis in Baghdad with sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers were finally sentenced April 13, one to life, the others to 30 years. The sentences (<http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/editorials/2015/04/17/sentencing-blackwater-guards-sends-right-message/y3ThrHybtfHnQlnpH2UPEL/story.html>) are a reminder that we are not really leaving when the contractor force in the region and the gray areas in which they operate remain.

When President Barack Obama confirmed the coming 2016 end to American troops' involvement in Afghanistan at the White House last month in a joint news conference with Afghanistan's President Ashraf Ghani, he thanked soldiers and their families for their courage and sacrifice in the nation's longest war. He did not mention the other half of the US fighting force: the private contractors who work for the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the State Department. They are carrying out similar missions by different names and with less oversight. It's even in our pop fiction: On TV's hit show, "Madam Secretary," the secretary of state's husband secretly works for the CIA and conducts "special ops" missions connected to her work.

President Obama said (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/12/28/statement-president-end-combat-mission-afghanistan>), "The United States - along with our allies and partners - will maintain a limited military presence in Afghanistan to train, advise and assist Afghan forces and to conduct counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al-Qaida."

The Washington Post and other media reported a \$52 billion CIA "black budget" (http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/black-budget-summary-details-us-spy-networks-successes-failures-and-objectives/2013/08/29/7e57bb78-10ab-11e3-8cdd-bdc09410972_story.html) for 2013 disclosed by Edward Snowden - money hidden from the public that goes largely to contractors. If the presence of private military contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq is obscured, how is the public supposed to know if we are truly "out?"

Contractors answer to a firm contracted by a federal agency. They can serve a variety of purposes: combat, security, logistics, health services, transportation, food service; hence the tongue-in-cheek "private army" label for the private military contractor industry.

"The military is unable to effectively execute many operations, particularly those that are large-scale and long-term in nature, without extensive operational contract support," according to a 2013 Library of Congress report.

More than 3,000 contractors remained in Iraq last year. A DOD contractor census shows that 39,609 contractors are still in Afghanistan alongside 10,000 troops.

"Those numbers are way too low," said Chip Hauss, government liaison for the Alliance for Peacebuilding, who also is a professor at George Mason University and Oberlin College graduate. He agrees the true numbers are hidden by the "black budget." Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich told us the best way to fight al-Qaida and ISIS, given Americans' reticence about using our troops, is "by mercenaries," and it seems we are now doing so.

According to former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, private military contractors were used "without any supervision." (<https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43074.pdf>) Although the Department of Defense has taken steps to better regulate private military contractors, oversight is still lacking. The Library of Congress reported in 2013 that "lack of data makes it difficult to determine to what extent the billions of dollars spent [on contractors] ... have contributed to achieving the mission."

While we may be saving face by troop withdrawal, we are not saving money. At least \$200 billion was officially awarded in contracts during the Iraq war in addition to nonpublic "black" budgets. According to the Pentagon's Tenth Quadrennial Review

(<http://www.whs.mil/library/doc/Tenth.pdf>)of Military compensation, private military contractors made higher salaries (\$165,000 per year, excluding benefits) than sergeants in the military (\$63,340 a year, excluding benefits).

Iraqis tortured by contractors at the Abu Ghraib prison with electric shock, sexual violence and broken bones are still in court for compensation from a company, CACI International (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/05/opinion/will-anyone-pay-for-abu-ghraib.html?_r=0), which continues to receive government contracts.

Private military contractors are the "military-industrial complex" Eisenhower warned about back in 1961. Contractors serving in Iraq and Afghanistan are paid with US government funds, but the law hides them and their money. If we're leaving, whether for moral reasons or to free funds for domestic programs, that has to include contractors. If we are staying, we have a right to oversight against unjust murder and torture, to know what we are paying for, and to see where the money goes.

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