

The privatizing of war and security in Afghanistan: future or dead end?

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In a sense, the latest Afghan conflict (i.e., since 2002) was from the very start characterized by a high degree of privatization. As some authors have put it, the Afghan model, “combining indigenous armies, U.S. special operators, and airpower ... suggests a less costly and more effective method of accomplishing U.S. security objectives.”¹ The “indigenous armies” utilized in 2001 were of course non-state armed groups, some of which had a political dimension to them and some had not. Among the latter were a number of local strongmen and tribal leaders mobilized through direct payment of cash by the CIA to fight against Taliban forces in southern, southeastern, and eastern Afghanistan. These could be appropriately described as private armies. It is open to discussion whether the primary motivation of these strongmen and of their fighters was profit or something else. Although cash incentives were a key factor of mobilization, it is likely that the militiamen were also motivated by loyalty to their leaders. For the leaders, a motivational factor was participation in the division of the political spoils at the end of the war. Indeed, many of them were then appointed to official positions such as governors, military commanders, chiefs of police, or ministers.

In strategic terms, the reliance on directly funded allies to conduct joint operations was a significant innovation.² For some time after 2001, the U.S. command continued to occasionally use militias in military operations against remnants of the Taliban in southern and eastern Afghanistan. When needed, U.S. officers would approach a strongman and ask him to contribute some militiamen to a particular operation, of course in exchange for payment. Such opportunities appear to have been largely welcomed, not only because of the cash gains but for other reasons too. For example, it permitted strongmen to reward their militiamen and maintain relatively large forces mobilized, at no additional cost to them. These joint operations also offered the opportunity to pose as “America’s friends,” a status which could be used to both expand their influence and intimidate potential rivals.³

Nonetheless, some developments which occurred after 2001 took much of the shine away from the concept. Particularly from 2003 to 2004 it emerged clearly that there were drawbacks to relying on private armies to control Afghanistan. In the perception of western policymakers – and sometimes among NATO officers – heroic anti-Taliban fighters began turning into warlords. Stories about corruption, human rights abuses, illegal taxation, and land grabs started emerging to embarrass the often naïve proponents of the new strategic concept.⁴ Even more worryingly for the policymakers, the strongmen turned out to be unreliable allies, not only because of

their weak commitment to do any serious fighting, but also because of their inclination to put local, often petty, interests first. Already at the time of Operation Anaconda, the first large-scale joint operation of the post-Taliban period, allegations started to surface that Hazrat Ali’s militiamen had let the Arab fighters slip through the net into Pakistan.⁵ Similar allegations would later hit Gul Agha Shirzai of Kandahar, while another U.S. ally, Padcha Khan Zadran, discredited himself by turning against President Karzai and forcing the Americans to dump him.⁶

The Afghan conflict also featured other, more conventional, forms of privatization of security, at least in terms of the ongoing policy debate. This refers to the enlisting of “mercenaries” to fulfill specific tasks. Although private military companies (PMCs) have not yet arrived in Afghanistan and are unlikely to arrive there anytime soon, two other types of mercenaries have operated in Afghanistan so far. One type is directly recruited indigenous *combat* forces, which have been used as auxiliary troops mainly by the U.S. Army. The second type are non-Afghan, *non-combat* private security companies (PSCs), limited to the provision of security for expatriates and Afghan VIPs as well as training and support services for indigenous security forces.

While the use of alliances with strongmen’s private armies is falling out of fashion after a number of debacles (not only in Afghanistan but also in Iraq), the reliance on PSCs and mercenaries remains in great favor within policy circles in Washington and in some other western capitals. For this reason, the remainder of this article focuses on PSCs and their impact on post-Taliban Afghanistan, trying to establish whether they proved to be cost-effective, whether there have been any significant side effects to their employment, and whether there is potential for their future development and deployment.

DynCorp and USPI

An estimated twenty-five foreign security companies from the U.S., Britain, Australia, and South Africa were active in Afghanistan in mid-2006. The most important ones among them were DynCorp and U.S. Protection and Investigations (USPI) from the U.S., and Global Risk from the U.K. The latter focused on providing services to embassies. For example, the U.K. government spent £15.3 million from 2003 to 2006 for the provision of private security services.⁷ It was also involved with the U.N. in providing advice and support to the teams sent out to the provinces for organizing the presidential elections of 2004. USPI was a small and relatively unknown company before entering the Afghan market where it then conquered a leading position by competing aggressively on price. Within a couple of years, USPI had emerged by far as the market leader in terms of security guards services. It started by winning a major contract, worth \$36 million, with the U.S. construction company Louis Berger, to provide security on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. USPI became the most recognized brand name in the Afghan security market because of its ubiquitous guard boxes in Kabul’s streets. In terms of turnover, however, the market leader remained DynCorp.

The company started its activities in Afghanistan by winning an \$82 million contract to guard President Karzai and train his future Afghan bodyguards. Although the original plan was to directly provide guard services for a period of 6 to 18 months, it took until January 2006 for Karzai to have an all-Afghan bodyguard. The company then won another contract, worth \$290 million, mainly to train Afghan police and carry out drug eradication. In 2006, it employed 800 expatriates in Afghanistan, almost all of whom Americans, with starting salaries of \$100,000/year.⁸ (In 2006, the average cost, all inclusive, of personnel to the U.S. military was \$85,553,⁹ which compares favorably to the \$130,000 to \$250,000 which private contractors in Afghanistan cost the U.S. government.¹⁰ U.S. Special Forces soldiers earn between \$25,000 and \$120,000.)

If the economic rationale of using private security contractors is not always very clear, there might be an efficiency rationale. Maybe contractors deliver better service than army troops. Both DynCorp and USPI were the object of much controversy, although for different reasons. Complaints against private security firms do not just come from NGOs.¹¹ Karzai's DynCorp bodyguards for example were known for their arrogant and aggressive behavior, which included abusing European diplomats and slapping an Afghan minister. They were even reprimanded by the U.S. Department of State.¹² DynCorp's police training program was not exempt from criticism either, although much of what was wrong with it was due to the way the program had been conceived by the State Department. About 60,000 Afghan policemen were trained by DynCorp in 2 to 8 weeks courses, considered by many far too short to substantially affect the quality of Afghan police. Later, the basic course was increased to 8 weeks.¹³ Among expatriates and Afghans alike, the general assessment of the impact of police training was largely negative.¹⁴ DynCorp poppy eradication programs similarly drew criticism from several quarters. The initial \$50 million contract, awarded in 2004, was to train a 400 member Afghan eradication team (to become known as Afghan Eradication Force). They received two weeks of training before being deployed.¹⁵ Another \$100 million were added to the bill later and DynCorp would deploy expatriates, too, to oversee the eradication effort. In particular, a team of 80 people operated in Helmand province, the main poppy producer in the country, but allegations of corruption against the poppy eradication program continued to be pervasive. There was a widespread feeling that the fields of certain powerful individuals were being spared, and that it was possible to bribe the eradication officers to save one own's field.¹⁶ In the end, DynCorp only succeeded in eradicating 220 hectares of a planned 10,000 to 15,000 hectares.¹⁷

General Richards, NATO commander in Afghanistan, criticized the role of "unethical private security companies" which are "all too ready to discharge firearms" and contribute to lead the country "close to anarchy."¹⁸ There is substantial evidence that contractors working for PSCs have the tendency to behave worse than regular foreign army troops. They are accused of insensitivity and arrogance, but enjoy virtual immunity from prosecution.¹⁹ DynCorp's staff involvement in prostitution rings in

the Balkans are well known,²⁰ but stories are often heard about the involvement of private security contractors in prostitution rings in Afghanistan as well.²¹ At the same time, the boundary between regular American forces and private contractors is often murky enough to allow all sorts of incidents to take place, resulting in additional resentment against the U.S. among the Afghan population.²² The best known example of how wide a space is left open to abuses is that of Jonathan K. Idema, a freelance bounty hunter who had established his own private prison in Kabul, where he tortured prisoners trying to extract information. He had managed to convince even NATO that he was working for the U.S. government.²³

Afghan mercenaries: Sepoys and private guards

Recruitment and training of Afghan troops to serve as U.S. military force auxiliaries started in 2001. These auxiliaries would become known by the acronym of ASF (Afghan Security Forces). They appear to have been paid around \$125 to \$150 a month, significantly more than the troops of the Afghan National Army (ANA) or the Afghan National Police (ANP).²⁴ They would normally be deployed in numbers varying between 100 and 150 at U.S. "firebases" and forward bases where they would take care of external security and be available to accompany U.S. troops in patrols and combat missions. Their role was similar to that of the British empire's Sepoys. The total number of ASF militiamen was not disclosed, but it must have been in the low thousands (2,000 to 3,000). The rationale for creating the ASF was twofold. They would act as the interface between U.S. troops and the local population. Since they were recruited locally, they were expected to be acquainted with local customs and mores. They were also expected to be more acceptable to local populations when carrying out village and house searches, and arrests. The second rationale was to limit U.S. casualties. They would be deployed at the head and back of every U.S. convoy, and in battle they would approach the enemy ahead of U.S. troops. The U.S. military is not required to disclose information about ASF casualties, so that there are no statistics available. This could be a third rationale for creating the ASF. Judging from anecdotal information concerning the employment of ANA troops serving in similar roles from 2004 and from the limited information about ASF casualties,²⁵ their "screens" appear to have saved quite a few American lives, at some cost of their own.

A major problem related to the existence of the ASF was political in nature. The direct and unaccountable recruitment of Afghans to serve under the orders of U.S. officials could not but be a source of some embarrassment to the Afghan government, particularly to the extent that ANA units were beginning to be available for deployment. The problem was compounded by a gradually intensifying insurgency from 2003 onward, so that the ASF appeared undersized for its task. Although the ASF were hardly ever mentioned in the documents of the Afghan government, of the United Nations, or of Kabul's diplomatic community, expanding its size would have increased the danger of ASF turning into a political issue. As a result, it was decided

to gradually disband the ASF from 2005, providing incentives for them to join the ANA or the ANP.²⁶ Thus, ANA units gradually replaced the ASF in the role of auxiliaries.

Afghan mercenaries were not just recruited into the ASF. Militias, usually a few hundred men each, were formed *ad hoc* in some localities with CIA funds to help hunt down remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda, but were mostly disbanded or turned into ASF by 2003.²⁷ In fact, virtually every country opening military bases in Afghanistan recruited small numbers of locals to provide external security of the premises. This utilization of local mercenaries was never controversial, given their very modest numbers and limited role. More controversial proved the recruitment of Afghans by foreign security companies, not only because of the larger numbers involved, but also because of the modalities of recruitment and of their activities.

In terms of recruitment of Afghans, the most important PSC operating in Afghanistan was and is U.S. Protection and Investigations (USPI). The company employed as many as 1,200 Afghans along the Kabul-Kandahar highway, but was present elsewhere in Afghanistan too. In particular, it employed hundreds of Afghans in Kabul at \$3 a day to provide security to offices of international organizations and along the Kandahar-Girishk road, where it protected U.N. deminers. Overall, USPI was employing about 5,000 Afghans as guards in 2006. USPI's practices were often a source of controversy. It was accused of overcharging, as only 400 to 500 of the men supposed to be on its pay bill on the Kabul-Kandahar road appeared to be actually there. On the same highway, it used highway police commanders and policemen to provide security, with the collaboration of General Jurat of the Afghan Ministry of Interior. Although formally this "cooperation" was presented as capacity building, the policemen were in fact doubling up as private guards and saw their salary increase to \$150 a month. Among the allegations were accusations of drug running and illegal taxation. Its practice of approaching local commanders and paying them money to provide their own men for establishing posts along the highway was also the object of much criticism, particularly since the U.N. was trying to demobilize militias countrywide.²⁸ USPI adopted the same practices in Helmand too.²⁹

Conclusion: a dead end

The assessment of the employment of mercenaries in Afghanistan gives mixed results. U.S. armed forces appear to have been happy with their ASF and *ad hoc* militias and only replaced them because of political reasons or because they felt that they were no longer needed. At least some U.S. officers viewed the locally recruited ASF as having "a better feel for the region's people and geography" than the nationally recruited ANA troops.³⁰ Could the ASF model be extrapolated and turned into something more similar to the old Sepoys, not only in terms of tactical employment but also in terms of their strategic and political role? As discussed, there are major political constraints to a wider use of ASF-style forces. Accusations of neo-colonialism would flourish,

something which U.S. authorities cannot afford at a time when their aims in Afghanistan and elsewhere are already under close scrutiny.

By contrast, the work of PSCs seems to have satisfied few. The main rationale for their use is the overstretching of U.S. armed forces and, in particular, of its Special Forces. While in the short term no practical alternative to the use of PSCs existed, from an economic standpoint it is not at all obvious whether this option saves any money to the governments involved in the medium and long-term. Moreover, there seem to be negative side effects to the use of private security contractors on the ground. They succeeded in maintaining the security of their protégés, but the extent of the actual threat is not easy to assess. The only attempt on Karzai's life took place before the contracting of DynCorp. After the contractors got involved, Karzai was effectively isolated from contact with the Afghan public. The few recorded violent incidents involving private contractors were direct attacks against them, rather than against the individuals or offices which they were paid to protect. For example an attack on DynCorp premises in Kabul killed five staff members, as well as several Afghan civilians, and might have been related to the unpopularity of the company's men.

Private security contractors are not subjected to the control of military authorities, nor to military discipline. Their record of abusive behavior is indisputable and there are indications that they might have played a significant role in alienating the Afghan public and turning it against "foreigners." Unless much changes, the potential of private security companies in peacekeeping does not appear to be a bright one.

Notes

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1. Andres, *et al.* (2005/6, pp. 124-125).
2. For an enthusiastic endorsement of the concept, see Andres, *et al.* (2005/6).
3. See, e.g. Giustozzi (forthcoming); Chayes (2006, p. 61).
4. For examples of anti-warlord literature see Human Rights Watch (2002; 2003; 2004).
5. Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman, quoted in *Stratfor*, 14 September 2005.
6. Giustozzi (2003, pp. 9-10).

7. "UK pays £150m for private security in war zones." *The Scotsman*. 23 September 2006.
8. Nawa (2006).
9. Based on figures published in IISS (2006).
10. Exact figures are not available, because the U.S. government is unable to specify how much it spends on PSCs. See GAO (2005b).
11. See Keilthy (2004).
12. "DynCorp Guards Chastised by U.S. State Department." *BBC News*. 14 October 2004. See also Tepperman (2002) and Isenberg (2003).
13. Rohde (2006); GAO (2005a, p. 3).
14. Personal communications with U.N. officials, Afghan tribal elders, and politicians, Kabul, Kunduz, Toluqan, Kandahar, Mazar-i Sharif, January 2004 to October 2006.
15. "After the Taliban." *The Economist*. 20 November 2004, p. 46.
16. The Senlis Council (2006, p. 15).
17. Nawa (2006, p. 20).
18. See Norton-Taylor (2006).
19. Rubin (2006).
20. Crewdson (2002).
21. Personal communication with expatriates in Kabul, May 2005.
22. Smith and Gall (2004).
23. Meo (2004).
24. Naylor (2006).
25. It is common in today's Afghanistan to hear complaints about the losses suffered by ANA troops traveling in pickup trucks "protecting" US troops traveling in armored vehicles (personal communications with Afghan notables, Gardez, October 2006; see also Koelbl, 2006).
26. See CFCA (2006).
27. Scott-Tyson (2004) for the case of a 300-men militia in Orgun district (Paktika), south-eastern Afghanistan.
28. ICG (2005); Nawa (2006).
29. The Senlis Council (2006, p. 16).
30. Naylor (2006).

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