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Rise of the American Mercenary

By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos
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Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton has asserted several times, and quite vociferously, that there will be “no American ground troops in Syria” if she is elected president in November.

While the definition of “ground troops” is flexible ^[1], there is a second reality that very few people are talking about in Washington today.

Not unlike the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq ^[2]—where private military contractors fed, trained, equipped, and protected U.S. military forces “on the ground” in unprecedented numbers—an escalation of hired security forces in a hot spot like Syria would likely boost the presence of U.S. “boots” without causing the political heartburn of putting more actual soldiers and Marines in harm’s way.

In fact, it may already be happening.

Over the summer, a no-bid contract was reportedly awarded to Six3 Intelligence Solutions, a company based in McLean, Va., which in 2014 was acquired by major defense-industry player CACI International. The \$10 million award, according to an otherwise pedestrian Pentagon notice ^[3], was for “intelligence analysis services” to be performed “in Germany, Italy, and Syria.” It was probably the first sliver of proof that U.S. contractors are actually operating there, despite persistent evasions by military officials.

“I don’t know if there are any contractors in Syria but I suspect there are a lot. We just can’t sustain military operations today without the private sector. We are strategically dependent on the private sector,” said author Sean McFate, also an Army special-forces veteran and assistant professor at the National Defense University.

When asked about the Six3 contract—what it’s for, how many contractors would be in Syria working under it—Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. David S. Hylton said the Syria part of the notice was “a mistake” and has been since amended.

“The Performance Work Statement (PWS) for the contract states that ‘support is required at multiple locations to include fixed sites in Central Europe (Germany and Italy), possible future fixed sites in Eastern Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Romania, Poland), in deployed contingency operations areas to include the Balkans, and other contingency areas,’” said Hylton. The contract is on behalf of U.S. Army Europe and “intended to provide ... intelligence analysis, operations and planning, security support, and information systems operation, maintenance and sustainment.”

“The PWS does not contain the word Syria, nor does it make any reference that would directly lead to Syria, e.g., the Levant, counter-ISIL, Assad,” Hylton added.

McFate said he was told by other reporters about the “error” in the notice. “I’ve been watching these things for 20 years—I’ve never seen a ‘mistake’ like this.”

The Pentagon did provide quarterly numbers on the private forces currently in Afghanistan and Iraq, ^[4] but when asked how many, if any, contractors are in Syria at this time, officials did not respond.

Meanwhile the White House has authorized the deployment of 300 U.S. Special Operations Forces to Syria, 40 of which were reportedly sent to Northern Syria ^[5] with Turkish troops and “vetted Syrian opposition forces” on an ISIS clearing mission in September.

“Operation Noble Lance,” as it has been dubbed, would continue the ongoing “advising, assisting and training” mission the U.S. has conducted with so-called moderate Syrian rebel forces and anti-ISIS Kurdish and Arab fighters, according to the Pentagon.

But it appears, according to *The Hill* ^[6], that we don’t really know how many troops are really there either, or even in Iraq right now.

Secretary of State Ash Carter announced the addition of 600 more troops ^[7] to Iraq in September, bringing the official number there up to about 5,000. However, that doesn’t count the “temporary” forces that may drift in and out of the Area of Operations (AOR), and it certainly doesn’t include contractors, writes reporter Kristina Wong.

“The issue has become a sticking point, with critics pressing the Pentagon for more transparency,” said Wong, who was told there were upwards of 900 additional “temporary” troops on the ground in Iraq that “tend to run around.” There is no clue on how many temps are “running around” Syria at this time.

“Some worry that officials are hiding the deepening U.S. involvement in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” she added, quoting an Army colonel who cited “orders” for not giving out anything beyond the official “force management” figures.

“There’s been a decision made not to release that number,” said spokesman Army Col. Steve Warren, back in March. “The number that we release is our force management level. ... I don’t have a reason for not releasing this number other than it’s the orders that I’m under.”

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr. tried to soften those words a bit later, saying the military wasn’t reluctant to release more, but has done things this way for 15 years.

If nailing down the number of troops is hard, the extent of the contractor force may never be known, particularly in Syria.

But if recent history is any indication, as the footprint grows, so will the private shadow army, said McFate. His book, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What they Mean for World Order* ^[8], argues that a global industry has been unleashed by the American reliance on the hired guns overseas since 9/11. It is unstoppable, partly because militaries like the U.S.’s have become so dependent on it. Private contractors also offer a cloak of deniability, and frankly, the ability to operate outside of institutional laws and boundaries.

“There is no oversight, no tracking mechanisms,” said McFate. “Obama pledged to hold this industry accountable, and did nothing about it—the lack of response is a story in itself.”

In fact, *Foreign Policy* writer Micah Zenko argued ^[9], the rise of the contractor to wage America’s military operations is Obama’s silent national-security legacy, with more dead contractors on his watch (1,540 as of March) and little or no transparency about who these contractors are and what they do.

He scoffed at Obama’s insistence that he has pursued a “light U.S. footprint” across these conflict zones. “Were it not for these contractors, Obama’s ‘light footprint’ would suddenly be two or three times as large,” Zenko wrote.

Neil Gordon, a contracting expert for the Project on Government Oversight, agrees. “It’s the classic dodge—here we are shrinking the size of the government when in reality it is all being made up by contractors.”

Meanwhile, McFate likes to describe it as a largely unregulated, Wild West atmosphere in which soldiers of fortune for both Uncle Sam and private corporations protecting interests intermingle in hot zones like Iraq.

“We have contractors and mercenaries all over Northern Iraq, operating out of Erbil, some doing oil protection, others training with Peshmerga, some are basically adventurers trying to do their own thing out there,” McFate said. “Erbil is sort of like that bar in *Star Wars*, the Mos Eisley Cantina; it’s on the edge of civilization, it’s full of weird people, and a lot of them are armed.”

CACI did not return a request for comment about its work in Syria or otherwise. We do know from a Bloomberg business snapshot ^[10] that Six3 provides, in part, “identity intelligence and biometrics, forensics and analysis, counterintelligence operations support, HUMINT operations support, anti-terrorism and force protection, diplomatic security support, consulting and policy development, and analytic transformation.”

McFate, who after leaving the Army worked for DynCorp International—helping raise an army for Liberia in 2004 and other missions—has some idea of what they might be doing if they are indeed in the war zone. “They are probably conducting HUMINT, which means interrogation support,” he said, pointing out CACI’s role in the interrogations ^[11] at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison. (CACI has fought back ^[12] against lawsuits, but its connection remains part of the sordid story.) “Or they are facilitating on-the-ground intelligence.”

In addition, no one knows how many contractors might be working for the CIA in Syria or anywhere else, because that information is classified.

We do know that the number of private military contractors in Iraq has soared since 2015. At the beginning of the year there were 250, according to CENTCOM data. (CENTCOM, which covers the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, is the only geographic command that currently releases such data.) As of July of this year there were 2,485.

In Afghanistan, where there are supposedly around 9,800 U.S. military left in the country, there were 26,435 contractors as of July, nearly three times as many “boots on the ground.” Of that number, 8,837 were listed as U.S. citizens, 5,774 as third-country nationals, and 11,824 as Afghans.

In Iraq, 1,605 of the contractors were American in July; 528 were third-party nationals, and 352 were Iraqis.

In addition to Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. deployed 13,774 contractors in “other CENTCOM locations.”

According to a report by *Defense One* ^[13] earlier this year, there were an additional 5,800 contractors working in Iraq for other agencies, including the State Department, as of February.

Of course, not all contractors are hired guns. The majority in Iraq as of this summer, for example, were logistics and maintenance contractors, followed by translators, construction, transportation, and management, and then security professionals—of which there were 142. “Intelligence services” weren’t listed, but there were 62 people categorized under “other.”

But what the breakdown shows—and it is similar for Afghanistan—is that nearly every level of what we would consider military operations has been farmed out. “I think that is the model ... all roads lead to contracting,” said McFate, “because ultimately, you have these very ambitious strategic objectives, and you have American people who want to achieve, but they don’t want to bleed.”

Choosing to use contractors to stave off the difficult decision to put troops in harm’s way “circumvents democratic accountability of the armed forces,” he charged.

Ironically, Russia has also been suspected of using private forces ^[14] to advance the war against anti-Assad rebels in Syria. According to Mark Galeotti in *War on the Rocks* back in April ^[15], “Much of the confusion about the scale and nature of Russia’s direct commitment on the ground probably reflects the presence of both state and private forces, with each having their own deniable components.”

Sounds familiar, said McFate. “We launched this,” he said, calling it a global, “subterranean trend.”

“A lot of the insiders in Washington are in denial about this. They think private contracting ended with the wars, but they are deeply ignorant about what’s going on.”

The key is to watch how the next president deals with the pressure to get more involved in Syria come next year. Continue to keep an eye on the quarterly reports from DoD and press for the full story, he said, guessing the number of contractors would be rising steadily.

Contractors don’t count as “boots on the ground,” he reminded this reporter. “Americans don’t care about dead contractors the way they do about dead soldiers.”

