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## Convoy Guards in Afghanistan Face an Investigation

By DEXTER FILKINS

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MAIDAN SHAHR, Afghanistan — For months, reports have abounded here that the Afghan mercenaries who escort American and other NATO convoys through the badlands have been bribing Taliban insurgents to let them pass.

Then came a series of events last month that suggested all-out collusion with the insurgents.

After a pair of bloody confrontations with Afghan civilians, two of the biggest private security companies — Watan Risk Management and Compass Security — were banned from escorting NATO convoys on the highway between Kabul and Kandahar.

The ban took effect on May 14. At 10:30 a.m. that day, a NATO supply convoy rolling through the area came under attack. An Afghan driver and a soldier were killed, and a truck was overturned and burned. Within two weeks, with more than 1,000 trucks sitting stalled on the highway, the Afghan government granted Watan and Compass permission to resume.

Watan's president, Rashid Popal, strongly denied any suggestion that his men either colluded with insurgents or orchestrated attacks to emphasize the need for their services. Executives with Compass Security did not respond to questions.

But the episode, and others like it, has raised the suspicions of investigators here and in Washington, who are trying to track the tens of millions in taxpayer dollars paid to private security companies to move supplies to American and other NATO bases.

Although the investigation is not complete, the officials suspect that at least some of these security companies — many of which have ties to top Afghan officials — are using American money to bribe the Taliban. The officials suspect that the security companies may also engage in fake fighting to increase the sense of risk on the roads, and that they may sometimes stage attacks against competitors.

The suspicions raise fundamental questions about the conduct of operations here, since the convoys, and the supplies they deliver, are the lifeblood of the war effort.

“We’re funding both sides of the war,” a NATO official in Kabul said. The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the investigation was incomplete, said he believed millions of dollars were making their way to the Taliban.

### **Firms Tied to Officials**

The investigation is complicated by, among other things, the fact that some of the private security companies are owned by relatives of President [Hamid Karzai](#) and other senior Afghan officials. Mr. Popal, for instance, is a cousin of Mr. Karzai, and Western officials say that Watan Risk Management's largest shareholder is Mr. Karzai's brother Qayum.

The principal goal of the American-led campaign here is to prepare an Afghan state and army to fight the Taliban themselves. The possibility of collusion between the Taliban and Afghan officials suggests that, rather than fighting each other, the two Afghan sides may often cooperate under the noses of their wealthy benefactors.

“People think the insurgency and the government are separate, and that is just not always the case,” another NATO official in Kabul said. “What we are finding is that they are often bound up together.”

The security companies, which appear to operate under little supervision, have sometimes wreaked havoc on Afghan civilians. Some of the private security companies have been

known to attack villages on routes where convoys have come under fire, Western officials here say.

Records show there are 52 government-registered security companies, with 24,000 gunmen, most of them Afghans. But many, if not most, of the security companies are not registered at all, do not advertise themselves and do not necessarily restrain their gunmen with training or rules of engagement. Some appear to be little more than gangs with guns.

In the city of Kandahar alone, at least 23 armed groups — ostensibly security companies not registered with the government — are operating under virtually no government control, Western and Afghan officials said. On Kandahar's chaotic streets, armed men can often be seen roaming about without any uniforms or identification.

“There are thousands of people that have been paid by both civilian and military organizations to escort their convoys, and they all pose a problem,” said Hanif Atmar, the Afghan interior minister. (Mr. Atmar resigned under pressure from President Karzai on Sunday.) “The Afghan people are not ready to accept the private companies’ providing public security.”

Many of the gunmen are escorting convoys carrying supplies to American and NATO bases, under a \$2.2 billion American contract called Host Nation Trucking. American officials award contracts to Afghan and American trucking companies to transport food and other supplies to their bases around the country. They leave it to the trucking companies to protect themselves.

As a result, the trucking companies typically hire one of the security companies that have sprung up to capture the extraordinarily lucrative market in escorting convoys. The security companies typically charge \$800 to \$2,500 per truck to escort a convoy on a long stretch of highway. The convoys often contain hundreds of trucks each.

In addition, many of the security companies also have contracts to guard American military bases.

The money is so good, in fact, that the families of some of [Afghanistan](#)'s most powerful people, many of them government officials, have set up their own security companies to get in on the action.

In addition to Watan Risk Management, there is NCL Holdings, founded by Hamid Wardak, the son of Rahim Wardak, the Afghan defense minister. Elite Security Services, another NATO convoy escort service, is owned by Siddiq Mujadeddi, the son of Sibghatullah Mujadeddi, the speaker of the Afghan Senate, officials said. Asia Security Group, another private security company, was, at least until recently, controlled by Hashmat Karzai, a cousin of the president.

### **Unorthodox Methods**

The security companies' methods are sometimes unorthodox. While at least some of the companies are believed to be bribing Taliban fighters, many have also been known to act with extreme harshness toward villagers or insurgents who have tried to interfere with their convoys.

One of the more notorious commanders of a private security outfit is an Afghan named Ruhullah, who, like many Afghans, goes by one name. Mr. Ruhullah controls a company called Commando Security, which escorts convoys between Kandahar and Helmand Province to the west. While he is suspected of striking deals with some Taliban fighters, Mr. Ruhullah is known to have dealt brutally with those — civilians or insurgents — who have impeded the flow of his trucks.

“He’s laid waste to entire villages,” said an official at the Interior Ministry who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Many of the private security companies, including the one owned by Mr. Ruhullah, appear to be under the influence of [Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), a brother of President Karzai and the chairman of the Kandahar Provincial Council. Though nominally an American ally, Ahmed Wali Karzai has surfaced in numerous intelligence and law enforcement reports connecting him to Afghanistan’s booming opium trade.

He did not respond to questions for this article, but he has denied any involvement in Afghanistan’s narcotics trade.

The NATO official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the Popals, the nominal owners of Watan Risk Management, cooperate with Ahmed Wali Karzai and Mr. Ruhullah. “They are very, very close,” he said.

Mr. Popal, in his interview, said he had no contact with anyone in President Karzai's immediate family. "This is just politics," he said of the accusations made against him.

American and Afghan officials said that Ahmed Wali Karzai was moving rapidly to bring the 23 unregistered security companies in Kandahar under his own control. With the government's support, Ahmed Wali Karzai, together with Mr. Ruhullah, plan to form an umbrella company, called the Kandahar Security Force, that will broker business for the various individual companies, a senior NATO official said.

"He wants a cut of every contract," the NATO official in Kabul said.

At least two groups of American investigators are focusing on potential bribes to the Taliban: the House national security subcommittee, whose chairman is Representative John F. Tierney, a Democrat from Massachusetts; and another group working for NATO in Kabul.

While the practice of buying off the enemy may seem extraordinary, it is neither unusual here nor unprecedented. Many Afghans, even those in the government, have relatives, even brothers and sons, in the Taliban.

### **Following the Dollar Trail**

Western officials believe that Afghan officials have paid bribes to the Taliban before — for instance, so that they will refrain from attacking the transmission towers that make up the country's cellphone network. Officials familiar with the investigations say that most, if not all, of the security companies actually do fight the Taliban.

The evidence, they say, suggests that the Afghan security companies sometimes make deals with insurgents when they feel they have to — that is, where the Taliban are too strong to be defeated.

"The rule seems to be, if the attack is small, then crush it," the Interior Ministry official said. "But if the presence of Taliban is too big to crush, then make a deal."

Mr. Popal, the Watan executive, said that his security teams regularly fought the Taliban, and died doing so. Last year, he said, his company lost 250 men. "We fight the Taliban," Mr. Popal said.

Exact casualty figures are difficult to come by, because statistics are kept only for the Host Nation Trucking contract. American officials in Kabul say 27 security contractors were killed between April 2009 and May 2010, and 38 were wounded. Investigators say they are having a hard time putting a dollar figure on the amount the Taliban may be receiving, in part because the trucking companies are not required to report what they pay for security. Trucking contractors pay security companies, which sometimes award subcontractors to other companies, which sometimes do the same.

“I can’t tell you about the sub to the sub to the sub,” the senior NATO official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

As a result, much about the relationships between the security companies and the Taliban is shrouded in mystery. Afghan and NATO officials say that anecdotal evidence suggests that in order to keep their trucks moving — and to keep up their business — some companies may sometimes pay Taliban fighters not to attack, to sometimes mount attacks on competitors, or, as is suspected in the case in Maidan Shahr, to attack NATO forces.

“It would be my expectation that people might create their own demand,” said [Maj. Gen. Nick Carter](#), the commander of NATO forces in southern Afghanistan. “It is essential that these highways move freely without extortion and racketeering.”

Officials say that they are not certain what happened last month in Maidan Shahr, but that some of the circumstances surrounding the case points to the possibility of some sort of collusion with insurgents or criminals.

Mohammed Halim Fedai, the governor of Wardak Province and the official who pushed for the ban on Watan and Compass, said he was not sure what happened either. But he noted that Watan Risk Management came under attack far less frequently than the other security companies did.

“Maybe they are just stronger, so the Taliban are afraid of them,” he said.

An Afghan official in Maidan Shahr, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that there were strong suspicions in the Afghan government that Watan pays the Taliban, and that the company acts brutally to deal with threats to its business.

“Watan’s people may have staged the attack themselves,” he said.