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The corporate warriors who make a killing in Afghanistan

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I'm writing this in Kabul.

A few days ago I got a lift back to my hotel by three men who would perhaps best be described as employees of the United States government. Let's just say they were not the kind of blokes you'd complain to if by chance they kicked sand in your face on the beach.

All three had been around a bit. Between them, over the years, their very specific expertise had led them to encounters with "bad guys" in Baghdad and the cocaine cartels of Colombia. In theory, I should have felt reassured by their presence. Only an hour earlier the same streets we were passing along had seen a suicide bomber on a motorbike steer a path to paradise taking as many unsuspecting Afghan civilians with him as possible.

While that was discomfiting in itself, my real unease stemmed from two other factors. The first was the Americans' high profile, armed as they were to the teeth and travelling in a vehicle that might as well have had "infidel" painted in big letters across the side. While I've no doubt that they could have unleashed hell, and called in shock and awe back-up had we run into trouble, I couldn't help wishing I had been sitting alongside my trusted Afghan driver, Mirwais, in his clapped-out Corolla that never gets a second look in this city.

But what made me especially uneasy was the general appearance of these “civilian” US personnel, which was indistinguishable from those who share a similar role but operate purely out of the private sector. I’m referring of course to what in the past we used to simply call mercenaries, the sorts of guns for hire that once flourished across post-independence Africa, and whose bloody behaviour earned them the nickname *les affreux*: “the frightful ones” .

In Afghanistan today of course it’s all much more genteel, or so some would have us believe. Where once we had the frightful ones, now we have private security contractors, or PSCs, as they’re known in the business.

Every time I come to Afghanistan now, I can’t help noticing how increasingly difficult it is to tell the difference between who is a PSC, and their full staff counterparts from within the security and military apparatus of the US, British, Afghan or any other government represented here. The reason for this blurring of roles is of course because more of the work once done by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is tendered out to the likes of US companies like DynCorp or its British equivalent Aegis Defence Services.

“Corporate warriors” they have sometimes been dubbed, but the extent of their presence and influence here in Afghanistan is I think, a real cause for concern. For a start, they cost a fortune to run, with arguably little to show in return.

According to the humanitarian agency Oxfam, more than \$40 billion has been spent on Afghanistan since 2002, with about half going towards training and equipping the army and police. Much of this has been undertaken by PSCs, and this before the megabucks made from site, VIP and convoy security, operational co-ordination, intelligence analysis and hostage negotiation, to name just a few of the roles advertised these days on websites like privatemilitary.org or privateforces.com.

Frankly, it’s difficult to move around in Kabul without bumping into some British ex-squaddie, Hereford-trained SAS man, US cop or spook that isn’t cashing in here. What the people of Afghanistan get out of all this meanwhile is anybody’s guess. Even Afghan president, Hamid Karzai – himself no stranger to allegations of associating with types happy to make a bob or two from the war – has rounded on the PSCs. At last week’s “landmark” international conference he finally admitted that the financial waste and corruption associated with PSCs posed a key threat to combined efforts to strengthen the Afghan government.

As he spoke, there was a lot of vociferous head-nodding from international delegates, who while approving, knew full well that the reality on the ground in Afghanistan is somewhat different. Indeed, Karzai’s remarks came barely weeks after the CIA announced that it had retained the controversial private security firm Xe Services LLC, the company formerly known as Blackwater. By any standards, it’s a tidy little deal worth an estimated \$100million, oh, and that’s before another contract to act as bodyguards to US personnel in Afghanistan. Blackwater, of course, changed its name to Xe Services

LLC, some time after the killing of Iraqi civilians in a shoot-out in Baghdad in 2007, and when late last year a suicide bomber infiltrated a base in eastern Afghanistan killing seven CIA operatives, two of whom were reportedly Xe contractors. Only a few days ago, I bumped into one of their employees here in Kabul who was emphatic that he still preferred the name Blackwater despite its previous bad press.

“But jeez, don’t quote me on anything we do here, the company fires anyone for talking about that,” he added.

As if Xe Services, new contract didn’t fly in the face of Karzai’s conference remarks, there are also unanswered questions in the investigation into the activities of Michael Furlong, a senior American defence official who allegedly ran a network of private security contractors to gather intelligence on Taliban and al Qaeda militants which was then passed on to the US military for “lethal force” operations.

Furlong is said to have boasted that his contractors were his “Jason Bourne,” a reference to the fictional CIA assassin in the movies based on thrillers by author Robert Ludlum. Here in Afghanistan, the very word security, has become something of a mantra. It defines the here and now, but also what the country can expect in the future. Sometimes here it feels as though one man’s definition of security is another man’s vulnerability.

God knows ordinary Afghans themselves have benefited little from the reassurances such private security companies were meant to help deliver. If the US, Britain and their allies do indeed hand over the nation’s keys to Karzai by 2014, they will have to unravel and unpick an unholy mess left behind by many of these same contractors. For too long now they have been inextricably linked financially and politically to some very unsavoury characters, and I’m not simply talking about Afghan warlords.

Somewhere along the way in all of this, our mission in Afghanistan lost sight of the dividing line between legitimate military operations and the loose cannon practices of so many independent security contractors. Today, they might not be called mercenaries, but mercenary they are when it comes to taking all they can from this country’s plight. These soldiers of misfortune have only stoked up problems for Afghanistan’s future. When eventually they move on, behind them many will leave not only a trail of corruption, but also a nation arguably even more dangerously divided by the false loyalties and orphaned militias they created.