

Afghanistan Contractors Outnumber Troops

Despite Surge in U.S. Deployments, More Civilians Are Posted in War Zone

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Even as U.S. troops surge to new highs in Afghanistan they are outnumbered by military contractors working alongside them, according to a Defense Department census due to be distributed to Congress — illustrating how hard it is for the U.S. to wean itself from the large numbers of war-zone contractors that proved controversial in Iraq.

The number of military contractors in Afghanistan rose to almost 74,000 by June 30, far outnumbering the roughly 58,000 U.S. soldiers on the ground at that point. As the military force in Afghanistan grows further, to a planned 68,000 by the end of the year, the Defense Department expects the ranks of contractors to increase more.

The ranks of military contractors in Afghanistan have been growing along with the surge in troops. Above, contractor barracks at the Kandahar airfield.

The military requires contractors for essential functions ranging from supplying food and laundry services to guarding convoys and even military bases — functions that were once performed by military personnel but have been outsourced so a slimmed-down military can focus more on battle-related tasks.

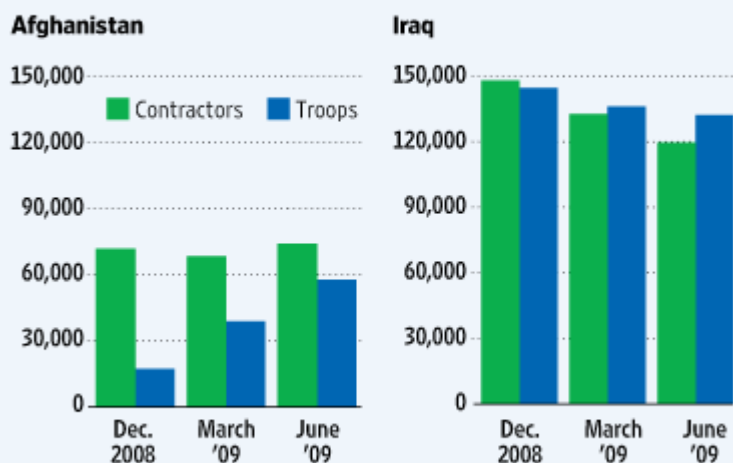
The Obama administration has sought to reduce its reliance on military contractors, worried that the Pentagon was ceding too much power to outside companies, failing to rein in costs and not achieving desired results.

President Obama has repeatedly called defense contractors to task since taking office. “In Iraq, too much money has been paid out for services that were never performed, buildings that were never completed, companies that skimmed off the top,” he said during a March speech.

In April, Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced plans to hire 30,000 civilian officials during to cut the percentage of contractors in the Pentagon’s own work force, and last month he told an audience of soldiers that contractor use overseas needed better controls.

Changing of the Guard

Number of military contractors versus the number of U.S. troops in:



Note: Figures as of the end of months listed
Source: Department of Defense

Military contractors' personnel for a time outnumbered U.S. troops in Iraq. The large contractor force was accompanied by issues ranging from questionable costs billed to the government to shooting of civilians by armed security guards. A September 2007 shooting incident involving Blackwater Worldwide guards working for the U.S. State Department, in which 17 Iraqis were killed, forced the U.S. to aggressively rework oversight of security firms.

Yet in Afghanistan as in Iraq, the Pentagon has found that the military has shrunk so much since the Cold War ended that it isn't big enough to sustain operations without using companies to directly support military operations.

"Because of the surge, we're trying to get ahead of the troops," said Gary Motsek, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Program Support, who helps oversee the Pentagon's battlefield contractor efforts. "So we're pushing contractors in place, doing it as fast as we can, and trying to be responsible about it."

The heavy reliance on contractors in Afghanistan signals that a situation that defense planners once considered temporary has become a standard fixture of U.S. military operations.

"For a sustained fight like our current commitments, the U.S. military can't go to war without contractors on the battlefield," said Steven Arnold, a former Army general and retired executive at logistics specialists Ecolog USA and KBR Inc. KBR was formerly owned by Halliburton Co. He added, "For that matter, neither can NATO."

That poses a challenge for military planners who must keep tabs on tens of thousands of people who are crucial to their operations yet are civilians outside the chain of command.

In Congress, there's a particular concern about security contractors who might upset diplomatic and military relationships. "We've had incidents when force has been used, we believe, improperly against citizens by contractors," said Sen. Carl Levin, the Michigan Democrat who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee. "This creates huge problems, obviously, for those who have been injured or killed and their families, but it also creates

huge problems for us and our policies in Afghanistan.”

In Iraq, as of June 30 there were 119,706 military contractors, down 10% from three months earlier and smaller than the number of U.S. troops, which stood at approximately 132,000. But as the Pentagon has been drawing down contractors in Iraq, their ranks have been growing in Afghanistan — rising by 9% over that same three-month period to 73,968. More than two-thirds of those are local, which reflects the desire to employ Afghans as part of the counterinsurgency there.

Many contractors in Afghanistan are likely to face combat-like conditions, particularly those manning far-flung outposts, and are exposed to possible militant attacks — blurring the line between soldier and support staff.

The reliance on contractors has prompted a shift in the defense industry, sending more money to logistics and construction companies that can perform everything from basic functions to project engineering.

A recent contract is worth up to \$15 billion to two firms, DynCorp International Inc. and Fluor Corp., to build and support U.S. military bases throughout Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, government auditors have repeatedly uncovered military mismanagement of contractors. The Wartime Contracting Commission reported finding during an April trip that the military had accepted a new headquarters building in Kabul hobbled by shoddy construction. Officials in Iraq and Afghanistan were unable to give the commission complete lists of work being contracted out at the bases they visited.

Coordination of security contractors, one of the most charged issues in Iraq, is being beefed up for Afghanistan, said Mr. Motsek, the Pentagon official. A new umbrella contract planned for later this year is designed to make awarding work speedier and to help oversight and vetting.

As well, he said more Defense Department civilians are being sent to oversee all types of contracts, and they will stay longer overseas than their predecessors did in Iraq.

Video conferencing and other remote management tools had fallen short as a substitute. The Army is also adding hundreds of civilian contracting personnel, among the measures being put in place.

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