

Security Firms in Afghanistan: Part of the Problem?

Private security companies contributing to rising tide of lawlessness

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Global Research, December 08, 2007

Institute for War & Peace Reporting (IWPR)

8 December 2007

Region: [Asia](#)

In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

Former commanders, ex-special forces, demobilised militias – at times it seems like the streets of Kabul are crammed full of strongmen looking to capitalise on their most marketable skill – the ability and readiness to fight.

Many have gravitated towards the new industry of private security firms, which guard banks, embassies, international organisations, and even some of the trendier restaurants in the capital.

But the Afghan government is now cracking down on these heavily-armed and often unlicensed firms, saying that several have been implicated in major crimes including armed robbery, kidnap and murder.

Some observers worry that the closure of security firms will make a bad situation even worse. The Afghan police cannot fill the gap, they insist, and turning thousands of armed and unemployed men loose on the streets will create an even more unstable environment.

SECURITY FIRM STAFF IMPLICATED IN CRIME

“Over the past few months we have conducted a review and have concluded that many of the armed robberies and murders have been carried out by members of these firms,” said Zmarai Bashiri, spokesman for the interior ministry. “The illegal use and sale of weapons is also common among these companies.”

Several high-profile cases have highlighted the problem. In August, for example, a British security expert was shot dead while transporting 200,000 US dollars in cash. Police questioned members of his staff in connection with the killing.

“We have arrested a number of people connected with the [security] companies; these people were engaged in murder, kidnapping and armed robbery,” said Bashiri. “We will deal with them in accordance with the law.”

The interior ministry has already closed down ten private security firms, and in recent days has conducted raids on several more.

One international company was found to have a large stockpile of illegal weapons, including 60 Kalashnikov rifles, nine heavy machine guns, and huge stores of ammunitions.

Various estimates exist on the number of firms in the country. According to Bashiri, there

are currently 60 private security companies in operation, employing a total of between 18,000 and 25,000 men. The majority are based in Kabul.

Bashiri explained that there are three categories of security firms being investigated by the ministry.

“First are those companies that are known to be involved in crime,” he said. “Then we have those that have not registered with the interior ministry, and lastly we have those whose licenses have expired. They are all illegal.”

The ministry has begun drafting a new law to regulate security companies, he said, adding, “The interior and justice ministries are working on this draft jointly, and it will set out all the required conditions including weapons, uniforms, duties and responsibilities, plus geographical restrictions.”

Bashiri argues that the security firms are spreading chaos and are just making things worse.

“They have proved a headache for us,” he said. “We will close them all.”

MILITIAS TRANSFORMED INTO COMMERCIAL OUTFITS

Men with guns are certainly not a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, which has gone through decades of war and internal strife. Many former militia commanders from the civil war of the Nineties have gone through one or more of the generously-funded but notoriously ineffectual disarmament processes, but have still been able to use stocks of weapons and loyal followers to create profitable security enterprises, while retaining much of their former power.

Mohammad Nasir, a resident of the Baghlan provincial capital Pul-e-Khumri told IWPR that a former regional strongman was now “masquerading” as the head of a security firm.

“The commander has gathered all of his men and given them new uniforms,” said Nasir. “They may be guarding NGOs [non-government organisations], but the commander still uses them to demonstrate his power. People still see him as a commander, he is still armed, and he can do anything he wants.”

This contributes to an atmosphere of tension in Baghlan, he continued.

“When people on the street see this company’s weapons and special vehicles, they feel frightened. They do not have good memories of these commanders during the time when they ruled the streets.”

But it may not be so easy to dispense with private security firms and the service they provide.

Given Afghanistan’s growing instability, many organisations do not feel comfortable operating without armed protection. The Afghan police cannot provide enough officers to guard the large number of local and foreign organisations, and many do not trust the police anyway.

“The police cannot ensure the security of the government, the cities, or the highways, let

alone the thousands of NGOs operating in Afghanistan,” said an official from a Chinese company building roads in Faryab province. “We have no guarantee that anyone will be able to protect us if the government shuts down our security firm.”

LACK OF REGULATION

To date, no security firm in Afghanistan has been implicated in the kind of controversy that surrounds the US company Blackwater, which is accused of killing 17 civilians in Iraq.

But, as in Iraq, confusion over rights and responsibilities contributes to a climate of fear and insecurity.

“Afghans do not know who security companies are and what they are doing in their country,” said Susanne Schmeidl, co-author of a study on private security companies issued in mid-November by the Swisspeace research institute. “Many Afghans are not able to distinguish the private security sector from the international armed forces, or from their own Afghan National Police and Afghan army, and general confusion prevails.”

Firms must be more closely regulated, she emphasised, to convince the population that security firms are doing more than contributing to the crime problem. And those who argue that security firms provide employment to men who would otherwise be a danger to the population are just postponing an inevitable day of reckoning.

“While there is a positive argument to be made that private security company employment keeps former strongmen and their militia off the streets... the dilemma of what happens to these militia when the contract ends needs to be addressed,” said Schmeidl.

COMPANIES SAY THEY PERFORM ESSENTIAL ROLE

Private security firms defend their presence, and insist that they are providing a valuable service.

Amir Mohammad, an official with RONCO, an international company that provides demining as well as security services, said the firm has a valid license and has not been shut down. Still, he opposes the interior ministry’s plan to close other security companies.

“This is a mistake by the interior ministry,” he told IWPR. “Thousands of people are employed by these firms, and they could end up on the street. These firms also pay huge annual taxes, and this will be a financial blow to the government. Foreign companies cannot rely on the Afghan [state] security agencies, so if the private firms are closed, no foreigner will invest in Afghanistan.”

Demining projects run by RONCO and others would be in jeopardy if their security could not be guaranteed, said Amir Mohammad.

“If the government continues with its plan, demining will stop in Afghanistan,” he said. “No foreigner will work in certain areas without a bodyguard. We work in Helmand, Kandahar and Jalalabad, where the police cannot provide security.”

But the interior ministry is determined to close down those firms operating outside the law.

“It is much better not to have a corrupt body than to have it,” said Bashiri. “We have found

that these organisations are not useful. We have to adopt another means of licensing them. All of their current operations are illegal because no working procedure exists.”

CAN POLICE FILL THE GAP?

Bashiri insists that the interior ministry will provide security cover once the illegal firms are closed.

“We will provide our own forces to ensure security when the firms are shut down. Charity organisations and business entities will be safe and they won’t have any complaints,” he said.

But Mohammad Fareed Hakimi, a political affairs analyst in northern Afghanistan, points to the deteriorating situation across the country, and expresses doubt that the interior ministry is up to the task of managing the situation.

“The government has closed these companies, but how can it fill the gap?” he said. “They cannot increase the number of police to what is required. If the interior ministry now has to guard banks and NGOs, the security gap will get even bigger.”

Added to this is the old problem of neutralising the power of former commanders and their armed militias.

“The government has to solve this problem in a way that will not make things worse,” said Hakimi. “Many security firms are owned by former commanders and their men. If these firms are closed, these men will once again gather around their leaders, and controlling them will be impossible.”

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