

108,000 Private Contractors in Afghanistan and “We Have No Idea What They’re Doing”

By [Global Research News](#)

Global Research, June 08, 2013
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Region: [Asia](#)

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by Aubrey Bloomfield

Two recently released reports, [one](#) by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and [one](#) by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), show that not only is the number of private contractors in Afghanistan increasing, but the Pentagon is also unable to tell what they are even doing there. Citing the reports, David Francis of the *Fiscal Times* [points out](#) that there are now 108,000 private contractors in Afghanistan (over 30,000 of whom are Americans), far more than the 65,700 U.S. troops still there, [and the number was counted at 110,404 last month](#). That amounts to 1.6 contractors, roughly 18,000 of which are private security contractors, for every American soldier.

Although the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is ostensibly winding down towards an eventual handover to Afghan security forces, as Francis [argues](#), “the increase in the contractors to troop ratio is yet another indication that although the vast majority of troops are leaving Afghanistan, a private army will remain in the country for years.”



According to the CRS, the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan show the increasing reliance of the military on private contractors. But replacing the military with private contractors is not necessarily a good thing. Highlighting the abuses committed by private military contractors, Angela Snell of the University of Illinois College of Law has [called this trend](#) a “convenient way for the U.S. government to evade its legal obligations, including the responsibility to protect the human rights of civilians in war and peace, by allowing private individuals, rather than official state actors, to perform services on behalf of the U.S. military.”

Not only does the growing use of private contractors give lie to the idea of a withdrawal from the country, but they are also very costly. Although still dwarfed by the ever-mounting total costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, CRS [reports](#) that “over the last six fiscal years, DOD [Department of Defense] obligations for contracts performed in the Iraq and Afghanistan areas of operation were approximately \$160 billion and exceeded total contract obligations of any other U.S. federal agency.”

Moreover, Francis points out that the CRS and GAO did not just measure the number of contractors and the cost, but the reports also assessed the Pentagon’s ability to monitor the work of contractors. And the results are damning. According to Francis, taken together the reports:

“Amount to yet another indictment of how the Pentagon deals with private workers. CRS

found that the Pentagon lacked the ability to document the work each contractor is performing. It also found even when the government has information on contractors, it's often inaccurate and doesn't reflect the actual work being done. This leaves the Pentagon unable to determine if the hundreds of billions it's spending are leading to effective results."

So despite the increasing number of private contractors being used and the hundreds of billions of dollars being spent on them, the Pentagon is not even able to determine what they are doing or whether it is effective. As CRS [reports](#), the information the Pentagon has on private contractors is probably not reliable enough to be used to make decisions "at the strategic level," thus hindering its ability to tell whether the work of contractors is contributing to "achieving the mission."

The U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been massive, and destructive, wastes of lives and money. Although the U.S. and its allies say that they [plan to remove combat troops](#) from Afghanistan by 2014, this will in no way be the end of the West's presence in the country. Francis reports that much of the work currently done by the military [will be done by the private contractors](#) after the military leaves. So while the attention paid to Afghanistan is likely to continue to dwindle even further, as has been the case in Iraq, as the military withdrawal picks up, the foreign occupation, by what [one analyst](#) has called "a de facto army," looks set to continue on.

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