

Who's calling the shots in Afghanistan? The Pentagon or the Mercenary Outfits?

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In the latest incident of a US military contractor overstepping its powers, the Pentagon accused one of its own members of organizing an “illegal spy ring” in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The story sounds like something straight out of James Bond: A renegade, out-of-control corporation, led by a former military officer and armed with state-of-the-art spyware, breaks out on its own to serve justice as it sees fit.

The only problem is that this is not some Hollywood fiction, but a real-life Pentagon investigation against a former US military officer who was somehow able to “overstep his powers” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, allegedly going so far as “calling the shots” against suspected militant hideouts.

Michael Furlong, a military defense contractor, is the subject of an ongoing investigation into an illegal spy ring, known as “Information Operations Capstone.” The network, a collection of small companies that used agents to collect intelligence on militant groups inside Afghanistan and Pakistan, operated under a \$22 million contract run by Lockheed Martin.

In a 15-page classified Pentagon report that was leaked to the Associated Press, investigators concluded that Furlong created an “unauthorized” intelligence network to collect information in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which was then forwarded to US military commanders. The investigators say the illegally collected information was used to strike suspected militant groups.

The Pentagon prohibits the hiring of private contractors as spies.

The New York Times, quoting unnamed sources, reported that the group was only supposed to “provide broad information about the political and tribal dynamics in the region – called ‘atmospherics’ – and ‘force protection’ information that might protect American troops from attack.”

To be fair to Mr. Furlong, there seems to be a very fine line between reporting on the “political and tribal dynamics” and informing headquarters about the coordinates of proven militant hideouts. Indeed, as the report acknowledges, it did not take long before the group made the “transition into traditional spying activities.”

The Associated Press reported that Furlong denied the accusations, saying he was never questioned by the investigators or privy to the contents of the report so that he may respond to the charges.

Furlong is on administrative leave, pending final review of the case by the Air Force inspector general, which will determine whether or not he overstepped his duties.

Is the Pentagon pacifying Pakistan?

The New York Times first broke the story in March under the headline: “Contractors tied to effort to track and kill militants (March 14, 2010).”

“Under the cover of a benign government information-gathering program,” the story began, “a Defense Department official set up a network of private contractors in Afghanistan and Pakistan to help track and kill suspected militants...”

The story was based on comments anonymous military officials and businessmen in Afghanistan and the United States.

“Michael D. Furlong... hired contractors from private security companies that employed former CIA and special forces operatives,” The paper reported, only citing anonymous sources. “The contractors, in turn, gathered intelligence on the whereabouts of suspected militants and the location of insurgent camps, and the information was then sent to military units and intelligence officials for possible lethal action in Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

Yet despite the fact that “senior generals” used the collected information, Mr. Furlong is now in hot water for “overstepping his powers.” It has not been disclosed how the military commanders were in the dark about Furlong’s activities, or even how he managed to penetrate hostile regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan without the help of coalition forces.

Eventually, the report noted, some “American officials...became troubled that Mr. Furlong seemed to be running an off-the-books spy operation.”

The next paragraph, which mentions Pakistan’s irritation over increasingly frequent incidences of US drone attacks on its territory, provides a possible explanation for the US government coming down hard on Furlong and his “spy ring.”

“[I]n Pakistan, where Qaeda and Taliban leaders are believed to be hiding, the secret use of private contractors may be seen as an attempt to get around the Pakistani government’s prohibition of American military personnel’s operating in the country.”

In other words, Furlong may well be the scapegoat of a secret military contract that attracted too much attention to itself. But if it is true that one individual and his mercenary band of former military officers really did perform undercover spy work in Afghanistan and Pakistan, picking and choosing where to initiate airstrikes, this would represent yet another disturbing trend in the US military’s history of using private military contractors.

Yet if history is a reliable indicator of future events, Mr. Furlong has little to worry about as far as justice goes. Indeed, the failure by US prosecutors to bring charges against former personnel of Blackwater, which is now known as Xe Services, has been stymied every step of the way.

According to The New York Times, “Late last year, charges were dismissed against five former Blackwater guards who had been indicted on manslaughter and related weapons charges in a September 2007 shooting incident in Nisour Square in Baghdad, in which 17

Iraqi civilians were killed.”

In September, a Virginia jury was unable to reach a verdict in the murder trial of two former Blackwater guards charged of killing two Afghan civilians.

In these cases, defendants are practically free from prosecution thanks to the so-called “Garrity Warning,” which says that defendants risk losing their jobs if they do not talk, but that they would be granted immunity from prosecution for anything they say.

Meanwhile, according to an article in the Huffington Post, “Blackwater...just can’t be disqualified from winning lucrative government contracts, no matter what they do.”

Blackwater, despite the buckets of blood on its hands, continues to win lucrative government contracts.

As Danger Room reported earlier this month, “Blackwater did not appear on the vendors’ list for Worldwide Protective Services. And the State Department confirms that the company, renamed Xe Services, didn’t actually submit its own independent bid.

“Instead, they used a blandly named cut-out, ‘International Development Solutions,’ to retain a toehold into State’s lucrative security business. No one who looks at the official announcement of the contract award would have any idea that firm is connected to Blackwater.”

Clearly, this is a very disturbing trend when private corporations are operating with impunity and judicial immunity in highly sensitive war zones, risking the disruption of diplomatic means to ending conflicts on which Barack Obama placed so much emphasis during his presidential campaign.

Hopefully these mercenary outfits don’t have any illusions about taking their private activities into another hotbed of heated passions known as Iran.

It’s time to reign in these mercenary corporate outfits and leave them to the imagination of James Bond movies.

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