

Analysis: Growing Use of Private Contractors to Provide Security in Iraq

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NPR: All Things Considered

Host: ROBERT SIEGEL

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From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Robert Siegel.

MELISSA BLOCK, host:

And I'm Melissa Block.

The killings of four defense contractors in Fallujah in March focused new attention on the work being done in Iraq by civilians. The scrutiny has increased with allegations that civilian employees may have been involved in the scandal over the abuse of Iraqi prisoners.

SIEGEL: Thousands of the private-sector jobs in Iraq are for contracts to provide security, serving as bodyguards, for example, or protecting buildings. These well-paying positions are filled mainly by ex-members of the military, or people who've worked in law enforcement. NPR's Adam Hochberg examines the role of these security companies in Iraq.

ADAM HOCHBERG reporting:

It's been more than six years since Charlie Sullens retired from the military, leaving behind a career as an Army Ranger. But last month, at his home in rural Missouri, he went through a familiar ritual: packing up a pair of olive-green duffel bags and preparing for a long trip overseas.

Mr. CHARLIE SULLENS (Former Army Ranger): I've packed a lot of khaki pants, a lot of personal toiletry articles and things, just because we're going to be kind of isolated--and boots to wear.

HOCHBERG: Sullens was packing for a five-month tour of duty in Iraq, not as a soldier but as an employee of a private security company called the Steele Foundation. He's taken a job as a so-called force protection officer guarding a power plant under construction.

Mr. SULLENS: The number-one concern will be to protect the workers who are coming in to work on the facility, escorting them into the job site and then looking after them while we're there. And then secondary will be the protection of the facility itself so that they don't go to all this trouble and work and then somehow something happens to the place and it gets destroyed. So it's basically a twofold mission.

HOCHBERG: Sullens' pay will be in line with what most American security contractors earn in Iraq, between 10 and \$20,000 a month. But he says that wasn't what motivated him to accept the position. Rather, he says he's looking to gain experience so he can come home and start his own security business. And he says this job, like his Army duty, gives him a chance to serve.

Mr. SULLENS: I think it's a good opportunity to help the Iraqi people get back on their feet, so, you know, I certainly take pride in that. I think more now it's just individual pride doing a professional job, you know, looking out for not only myself and the people I'm there to protect, but the other people on the team.

HOCHBERG: Sullens is among more than 15,000 people working private security jobs in Iraq. They protect diplomats, escort convoys and guard places like airports and construction sites. His employer, the Steele Foundation, is one of dozens of security firms in the country. Some contract directly with the US government or the new Iraqi authority; others work as subcontractors for companies rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure. Kenneth Kurtz is the Steele Foundation's chairman.

Mr. KENNETH KURTZ (Chairman, Steele Foundation): Business opportunities in Iraq are unusual, and we're not talking, you know, opportunities where you make a few hundred thousand dollars' profit. We're talking about tens, 20 million, 30 million, sometimes--I heard of a contract that went out for \$400 million. And that kind of gives you a perspective of what this means to businesses with our industry.

HOCHBERG: While Iraq is the most lucrative market for security companies, it's far from the only one. Kurtz's firm is active in Afghanistan, and it protected former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Other companies are working in Asia, South America and elsewhere, training soldiers, maintaining weapons and often doing the kinds of jobs the US military used to do itself. George Washington University Professor Deborah Avant says the industry first began to grow about 15 years ago, in large part because the military shrank.

Professor DEBORAH AVANT (George Washington University): Forces were downsized by about a third in the '90s, while the number of operations that they actually undertook increased, and so they were stretched thin. And this, combined with a belief in privatization, led to growth in the number of tasks that were outsourced to the private sector.

HOCHBERG: But Avant says the industry's expansion has led to difficult issues. She says there are no standard rules of engagement for private security workers, and few guidelines on whether the military can aid them if they come under fire. Since March, when four security men were killed in an Iraqi ambush, some members of Congress have called for greater scrutiny of the industry. Illinois Representative Jan **Schakowsky** has a number of questions about how private security firms are used.

Representative JAN **SCHAKOWSKY** (Democrat, Illinois): How many are there? How cost-effective are they? Are they exacerbating the problems, or really helping to resolve them?

All of these questions go unanswered, and yet billions of taxpayer dollars are going to these largely unaccountable private firms.

HOCHBERG: Even some leaders within the security business concede it needs more oversight. Kenneth Kurtz, the Steele Foundation executive, says the industry has expanded too quickly, especially in Iraq. While he's comfortable with his staff there, Kurtz says other security companies are hiring unqualified people, like Americans with no military backgrounds, or foreigners with questionable ones.

Mr. KURTZ: There are companies out there that, you know, you never heard of them before Iraq--they're popping up day by day--who are simply inexperienced for that environment. And if there is some type of an accident, God forbid they end up shooting at someone, the private security contractors then become targeted because they're viewed as being hostile and offensive.

HOCHBERG: The Iraqi authority is working on policies to govern security contractors. It hopes to set down training requirements, standards for conduct and rules of engagement. For Kurtz, the measures are long overdue. In a land where the line is often blurred between security work and warfare, he calls the current situation a recipe for disaster. Adam Hochberg, NPR News.