

# An Encouraging Outcome. Why the South African Historical Experience with Executive Outcomes Suggests That Using Private Afghan Military Forces in Iraq Could Benefit Global Security and Afghanistan Society

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**DISCLAIMER:** The opinions presented in this paper are entirely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the United States Army, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.

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Abstract:

In 1994, with Jonas Savimbi's UNITA insurgency in control of three-quarters of the country and threatening a triumphant march on Luanda, the MPLA government of Angola stunned the world by hiring the South African-based private military company Executive Outcomes (EO) to defend its regime. Within a year, following an EO-led counteroffensive that routed UNITA forces, the MPLA controlled over four-fifths of Angola and Savimbi was pressing for the first negotiated ceasefire in the history of the country's twenty-year civil war. One year later, EO once again caught lightning in a bottle, this time using a \$35 million contract with the government of Sierra Leone to defeat Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The success of EO's missions elevated the visibility of private military firms and re-awakened the industry from its two-century slumber. Lost in the controversy of the return of the new mercenaries, however, was the role of the post-apartheid South African government in promoting the activities of EO and their various affiliates.

Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) faced numerous challenges while managing South Africa's transition from apartheid to popular democracy. Among those problems was the presence of thousands of officers and soldiers of the apartheid-era South African Defense Forces (SADF), who had served the previous regime and remained a radical and potentially destabilizing force in the domestic politics of the emerging, new state. Thus when EO's chief executive officer, Eben Barlow, himself a retired SADF colonel, began to recruit from the ranks of his former colleagues and export them to places like Angola and Sierra Leone, the South African government did nothing to discourage their activity, and even allowed EO to headquarter their operations in Pretoria. Ingeniously, the ANC used the absence of this potentially revolutionary caste to build a stable and secure environment under which they could consolidate their authority, and after which they were able to neutralize EO, five years later, without any confrontation.

Like Mandela, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan faces a destabilizing and potentially revolutionary force in the form of the Afghan Militia Forces (AMF) that continue to exist under the control of their individual and autonomous regional warlords. Although actions are being taken to marginalize the recalcitrant warlords, the Bonn-mandated Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program has been slow in reducing their numbers and their continued presence has curbed the central government's legitimacy accordingly. If we examine the South African historical experience, however, we may find a potential solution that could lead to militia demobilization and warlord marginalization, while at the same time serving as a source for international peacekeepers in Iraq. This paper will explore the possibility of applying the South African model to Afghanistan. Specifically, this paper will examine whether or not the International Community should commission an Afghan private military corps to serve as United Nations peacekeepers in Iraq, while researching the merits and shortcomings of such a proposal. Particular attention will be paid to the leadership, logistical, operational, and financial components of what such a program would entail, as well as the political and diplomatic implications of using private Afghan peacekeepers in Iraq.

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During last summer's meeting in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh government officials reportedly approached Secretary of State Colin Powell with a proposal for an all-Muslim peacekeeping contingent in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Due to the nature of this proposal, neither Saudi nor American officials have revealed any of its probable details, but analysts speculate that at least three criteria would be required to secure its implementation. The first mandate is that, regardless of its internal and external chain of command, it would have to serve under overall United Nations command and control; this would make it the first of such forces in Iraq, perhaps allowing the UN to negotiate an area of responsibility separate from the Coalition and serving as a precursor for future multinational forces that do not desire to operate under command and control of the US. The second feature is that this proposed force would consist of soldiers from countries such as Pakistan, Algeria, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Morocco, but would be largely funded by Saudi, Kuwaiti, and UAE treasuries; this tenet would provide for a multi-national corps with contingents from countries with comparably professional militaries, some of which have extensive experience of their own in counter-insurgency operations. The third characteristic is that it would not allow contingents from any of Iraq's neighbor countries, a condition that would conveniently preclude the participation of Iran (as well as Saudi Arabia itself) and minimize tensions for surrounding Arab states that might otherwise have cause to fear such a program. If this report is to be believed, the Bush Administration may have found a major breakthrough in its strategic campaign in Iraq. As Edward Luttwak has pointed out, there would be some complications inherent in using Sunni Muslim peacekeepers in a country that is itself predominantly Shi'a;<sup>2</sup> nonetheless, the replacement of Western peacekeepers by Muslim peacekeepers of any sect would be an overall step in the right direction and welcome news for the international community and the Bush Administration. Yet while the Administration waits to make a decision on the Riyadh proposal, it would do well to consider a separate source for Muslim peacekeepers under a concept that would strengthen not just the multinational coalition in Iraq, but the security and stability of the sponsor country as well: the Coalition should consider commissioning a private Afghan military force for operations in Iraq. Properly implemented, this proposal would allow the Coalition to add several thousand Muslim peacekeepers to the Coalition, thus relieving the US and other Western countries from a sizable amount of soldiers they must currently provide, and introduce the first elements of a UN-led peacekeeping contingent into Iraq, while at the same time conveniently providing Afghanistan with a stabilizing effect upon their own domestic political and social order.

For political as well as practical reasons, any Afghan security forces introduced in Iraq would have to come from outside the inventory of the Government of Afghanistan. While enormous progress has been made in fielding and training the Afghan National Army (ANA), the possibility of deploying it beyond Afghan borders is out of the question for the foreseeable future given that forces are scarce and badly needed to deal with the challenges of the weakened, but still existing Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin (HIG) insurgencies. But, for reasons we will soon discuss, it is the very employment of private military forces- and not the nationally-controlled ANA- that would most serve to improve security conditions in Afghanistan. Further, the introduction of Afghan private military companies in Iraq would not represent a radical departure from current practice, especially if invited by the

Government of Iraq, and sanctioned and controlled by the Coalition or the United Nations. After all, private military organizations are almost commonplace in Iraq.

This, of course, begs the question what is a private military company?, and in order to find an answer, we must examine the history and origins of private warriors. Private military companies, historically referred to as mercenaries, have existed since long before the annals of recorded history with varying degrees of prominence.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps history's earliest and most well known employers of mercenaries were the ancient Carthaginians. Being a wealthy merchant city-state, Carthage saw little reason to expend the blood of their own citizens and relied on an entirely private army (composed almost exclusively of foreigners) to protect them from invasion from pirates, barbarians, and Roman legions. The arrangement allowed the Carthaginians to enjoy the benefits of a well-trained military force without having to devote much attention to it.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this policy was not without problems of its own. Periodically, these mercenaries would revolt against their employers, with predictably disastrous results for the citizens of Carthage. The Carthaginian mercenary experiment ended with the destruction of the city-state by the Roman legions, but resurfaced in Europe during the Middle Ages when the so-called "Free Companies" flourished during the Hundred Years War of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Samuel Huntington, European military society was essentially dominated by these martial entrepreneurs until they were eclipsed by the "aristocratic amateurs" of Gustavus Adolphus and Oliver Cromwell in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).<sup>5</sup> Still, while their role diminished, mercenaries did not entirely disappear from international military adventures. During the American Revolution, the British made extensive use of the German Hessians, while the Americans hired German military officers to advise and train their military units.<sup>6</sup> And the practice of employing private warriors was not confined to land: virtually every nation relied upon privateers, private mariners officially (albeit often secretly) sanctioned by their respective governments, to supplement their naval forces in conducting guerres de cours against rival states.<sup>7</sup> The United States, in fact, so relied upon "letters of marque and reprisal" that it refused to sign the 1856 Declaration of Paris outlawing privateering as a weapon of war.<sup>8</sup>

The rise of nationalism and the formation of the nation-state as the primary political unit marked the beginning of the decline of private warriors, though they continued to exist in small numbers and small conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Beginning in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, these soldiers of fortune began developing tremendously negative reputations with members of the international community, especially with the governments of Africa. This reputation, which is understandable if not well deserved, primarily stems from the unseemly behavior of mercenaries in the various civil and interstate wars on the African continent, and the perception that they were acting to continue the European colonial legacy.

In his book *Corporate Warriors*, perhaps the seminal study on the industry, P.W. Singer divides private military companies into three classifications, all of which can currently be found operating in Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

The first type, what he calls the "Military Provider Firms," consists of those that most closely resemble classical mercenaries and, as their name implies, they provide military forces

for their clients. Unabashed combatants, they consist of those groups who have “military skills directly applicable to combat and immediate combat support.” Though they may serve as elite infantry shock troops, more than likely they provide more technical, specialized forms of combat power: they may provide artillery, aviation, armor, or infantry units for training or operations, either as a combat multiplying component of a larger military force or as a separate and distinct unit of its own, usually guarding key personnel, facilities, or cities as well as the strategic resources of the host nation. While the majority of these type of soldiers generally hail from the former republics of the Soviet Union, the leading PMCs of this field are Sandline International, based in Great Britain, and- until five years ago- Executive Outcomes of South Africa. Blackwater, while operating with a much smaller footprint than Executive Outcomes or Sandline International, has been operating in independent roles for well over a year, mostly providing security for civilian contractors and prominent Iraqi officials, but sometimes conducting more complex operations on behalf of Coalition interests.

“Military Consultant Firms” constitute the second type of private military companies. This type consists of those companies that provide senior military leadership of an advisory nature: they plan training exercises and military operations, organize logistical, administrative, and maintenance systems, and develop the officer and non-commissioned officers of the client state. This type of PMC will concentrate on many of the activities that would normally be performed by a well-trained professional staff, but do not themselves directly participate in military operations as independent actors. The quintessential PMC of this archetype is the Washington-based Military Professional Resources, Incorporated (MPRI), which boasts of having more general per square foot than the Pentagon, and which earned fame for training and preparing the Croatian Army in the mid-90’s. The most well-known of this type of PMC operating in Iraq is the Vinnell Corporation, which has been heavily involved in leading, training, and advising the New Iraqi Army, as it emerges from its post-Saddam void and becomes a Western-style, professional force.<sup>11</sup>

The third type of PMC, those that are the furthest removed from combat, are the “Military Support Firms.” While not necessarily military in its function, they may provide general support services for a military organization. The services can be technical, such as aerial surveillance or human intelligence, or it can be any of the far more mundane tasks that would routinely be provided by a combat support battalion, such as vehicle maintenance, food preparation, or garbage disposal.<sup>12</sup> The omnipresent Kellogg, Brown, and Root (KBR) Services, has increasingly assumed many of the service support functions that would normally be conducted by the US Army’s logistics branch in Iraq, as it has in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Still, what is being proposed here is much more radical than the limited-scale combat operations being conducted by Blackwater, as well as the larger, non-combat functions being provided by Vinnell or KBR. What is being proposed here is the founding of an Afghan private military provider firm that would be independently capable of conducting stability and support operations in Iraq, and that could achieve strategic objectives on behalf of the Coalition. This, then, begs the question: can we rely upon a private military company to actually execute and succeed in this capacity?

The answer might be found by briefly revisiting the historical experience of the now defunct South African-based Executive Outcomes (EO), which demonstrated that under certain conditions and circumstances, a private military company can indeed achieve strategic objectives that more traditional actors, such as a third country nation-state military or the UN, cannot. In 1994, Jonas Savimbi's UNITA insurgency had seized control of three-quarters of the country and was threatening a final, triumphant march on Luanda. The MPLA government stunned the world by hiring a battalion-sized combined arms task force from EO to a series of multi-million dollar contracts to train MPLA security forces, re-gain areas of strategic importance, and finally to defeat Savimbi's insurgency once and for all. Armed with superior weapons, training, and equipment, Executive Outcomes launched a wildly successful counteroffensive that routed the UNITA forces and ultimately allowed the government to regain control over four-fifths of Angola.<sup>13</sup> Convinced that military victory was no longer a possibility, Savimbi pressed for a negotiated ceasefire, the first of its kind in the country's twenty year civil war and an achievement that a 40,000 to 50,000-strong Cuban expeditionary force had been unable to achieve in a sixteen year deployment. One year later, EO caught lightning in a bottle a second time, this time executing on behalf of a \$35-million contract with the government of Sierra Leone to defeat Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Once again successful, EO's eventual withdrawal and replacement by an ineffectual multinational force under UN command encouraged Sankoh to return to fighting.<sup>14</sup> The success of Executive Outcomes' missions represented a landmark achievement for the private military industry, and spawned dozens of similar firms from countries across the world- some of which performed admirably, others which did not, and all of which sparked discomfort and uneasiness from states throughout the Third World as well as international organizations, like the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United Nations. However, lost in the controversy of the return of the new mercenaries has been the role of the post-apartheid South African government in supporting the activities of EO and their numerous private military rivals, affiliates, and surrogates.

Recently swept into power, Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) faced numerous challenges and difficulties while managing South Africa's transition from repressive apartheid to popular democracy. Not least among those problems was the presence of thousands of officers and soldiers of the South African Defense Forces (SADF), both white and black, who had served the apartheid-era government and whose loyalty to the new government was dubious, at best. Organized, radical, and ideologically polarized, this group possessed the potential to be an incredibly destabilizing force in the domestic politics of the emerging, new South African state. Thus, when EO's chief executive officer, Eben Barlow, himself a retired SADF colonel, began to recruit from the ranks of his former colleagues and export them to places like Angola and Sierra Leone, the South African government did nothing to discourage their activity and allowed EO to headquarter their operations in Pretoria. Even as the remainder of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) protested their behavior and demanded their closing, South Africa turned a blind eye to EO's operations across the continent. Instead, the ANC used the absence of this potentially revolutionary faction to build a stable and secure political environment under which they could consolidate democratic authority. By 1999, the popular democracy process had succeeded in South Africa

and the ANC's legitimacy and authority was no longer tenuous; South Africa then forced Executive Outcomes and other private military companies operating within its borders to close their doors.

The environment in contemporary Afghanistan bears more than just a passing resemblance to the conditions of 1990's South Africa. Like Mandela, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan faces a destabilizing and potentially revolutionary force in the form of the Afghan Militia Forces (AMF) that dominate the provinces beyond Kabul. Descendants of the mujahideen armies that fought against the Soviet occupation and later the Taliban regime, the AMF exist in a quasi-official state in modern Afghanistan. Nominally under the control of the central government's Ministry of Defense, AMF factions take their orders from their local commanders who, in turn, may either be warlords loosely affiliated with the central government (such as Governor Muhammed Atta of Balkh Province) or autonomous power brokers who have no official standing, such as Abdul Sayyaf and his Ittehad-e Islami (Islamic Union for Liberation) militia. The Bonn Accords mandated a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program that would rapidly remove AMF from Kabul and ultimately eliminate the AMF presence throughout Afghanistan; but, thus far, DDR has universally frustrated observers with its long, drawn-out process and disappointing results. As units fail to demobilize, warlords continue to retain their private armies, thus failing to allow Afghanistan to make the crucial transition from rule by military power to rule by popular consent. President Karzai himself has recognized this problem, and recently identified the warlords as the nation's greatest threat to internal security, even moreso than narcotics trafficking and the remnants of the Taliban insurgency. Actions are being taken to marginalize the recalcitrant warlords, both from the Government of Afghanistan and from the international Coalition, but the process will be slow-going for the foreseeable future. A model based on the South African case study, however, may very well provide an opportunity for Afghanistan to increase militia demobilization and warlord marginalization, while at the same time introducing a new and badly needed source for international peacekeepers in Iraq.

It is not the intent of this paper to discuss the details of this proposed force arrangement and structure; however, for the sake of clarity, I will address a few of the mine issues which would have to be address in the creation of this force. The proposed initiative would commission the establishment of a private military force to be jointly managed by Afghan commanders and Western advisors. This unique arrangement would take advantage of Afghan strengths, while allowing for Western oversight of administrative and logistical functions that the Afghan military culture has traditionally neglected, as well as ensuring efficient interface with Coalition and, perhaps, UN military command structures in Iraq. Actual command and control of the force would be a matter for political debate. Currently, the US-led Coalition remains the only military command in Iraq, but the arrival of a new, non-Western military force might serve as the impetus for division of the battle space into separate areas of responsibility for high-intensity and low-intensity operations; here the model would be the current relationship between the US-led multinational Coalition conducting Operation Enduring Freedom missions and the formerly Canadian-led, now Euro Corps-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) conducting stability and support operations in Afghanistan. However, if the UN were unable or unwilling to participate in such a structure,

the Coalition would still be capable of implementing this program with the consent and approval of the Government of Iraq. Critical to the success of marginalizing warlords would be the recruitment of mid-level commanders, small units and individuals from the existing AMF structure, which would substantially reduce the militia presence in Afghanistan. The warlords would have to comply with this recruiting campaign, as many of their soldiers lack the free will to change their professions without the orders of their commander; however, many would if they were to be compensated accordingly and were led to believe that it would not permanently affect their own power base. A rudimentary training program would also be required to ensure that this military force was prepared to conduct combat security operations, training the soldiers and officers in individual soldier and small unit tactics; this training could be undertaken in a selected area in Afghanistan or some other country, including Iraq itself, if the location were carefully selected. Additionally, a reintegration program, under the greater Afghan New Beginnings Program of DDR, should be established to greet the soldiers as they return from Iraq, thus taking advantage of the opportunity to transform the warriors into civilians before they return under the hand of their respective warlords. And while ultimate authority and funding responsibility for the force should reside with the UN, a more unilateral approach may be required for the initial period in order to ensure its viability. Further, human rights observers and Iraqi political-military officials should be embedded with this organization at various levels in order to ensure its compliance with laws of war and humanitarian norms- dimensions that the Afghans did not always stress during their campaigns against the Soviets and the Taliban.

Of course, this proposal would face its challenges. Funding and control issues would have to be sorted out, and at least the tacit consent of several governments would be required. But if properly implemented, this proposal could divest Afghanistan of several thousand of its most disquieting citizens, leading to a corresponding decrease in the power of warlords who rely upon their presence to undermine the legitimate government. South Africa demonstrated that private military companies within their midst could be manipulated to improve the country's domestic environment; perhaps, with luck and careful management, history could repeat itself in Afghanistan.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Unclassified, open-source reports of this meeting and the details of the proposal have been discussed by numerous Internet-based analysts, including Thomas Friedman's STRATFOR and John Pike's Global Security. See: Stratfor.com Geopolitical Diary: Thursday, July 29, 2004 and "Iraq: Muslim, Arab Troops?", August 02, 2004. URL: [www.stratfor.com](http://www.stratfor.com). See also, Global Security, "IRAQ: 'MUSLIM PEACEKEEPING FORCE' GETS TEPID RECEPTION," 6 August 2004. URL: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2004/08/www40806.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Luttwak, "Disengagement from Iraq, As Strategy," in an email to the author, Friday, 13 August 2004.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that most contemporary Private Military Companies dislike being referred to as "mercenaries" and strongly contest the notion that they are soldiers-for-hire. This primarily stems from the negative stigma attached to the term, but many PMCs contest the link on the grounds that they do not engage in direct combat or combat support activities, the traditional domain of "classic" mercenaries.

<sup>4</sup> This arrangement was mirrored by Renaissance Italy. See Thomas Adams, "The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict," *Parameter* (Summer 1999): 103-106.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 29.

<sup>6</sup> James R. Davis, *Fortune's Warriors: Private Armies and the New World Order* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), 172.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene B. Smith, "The New Condottieri and US Policy: The Privatization of Conflict and Its Implications," *Parameters* (Winter 2002-2003): 106.

<sup>8</sup> Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> P.W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 91-148. For the purposes of this paper, we will not include so-called "Security Service Companies" (those companies that specialize in operations primarily relating to security and which are not of a military nature) as PMCs, though it should be noted that they occupy a distinct and particular role in the greater scheme of privatized security forces.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Adams, "The New Mercenaries and the Privatization of Conflict," *Parameters* (Summer 1999): 103-106; Singer, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Adams, 103-106

<sup>13</sup> Kevin A. O'Brien, "Private Military Companies and African Security, 1990-98," in *Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 51-52.

<sup>14</sup> Abdel-Fatau Musah, "A Country Under Siege: State Decay and Corporate Military Intervention in Sierra Leone," in *Mercenaries*, 91-97.