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Census Counts 100,000 Contractors in Iraq

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Washington Post Staff Writer
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There are about 100,000 government contractors operating in Iraq, not counting subcontractors, a total that is approaching the size of the U.S. military force there, according to the military's first census of the growing population of civilians operating in the battlefield.

The survey finding, which includes Americans, Iraqis and third-party nationals hired by companies operating under U.S. government contracts, is significantly higher and wider in scope than the Pentagon's only previous estimate, which said there were 25,000 security contractors in the country. It is also 10 times the estimated

number of contractors that deployed during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, reflecting the Pentagon's growing post-Cold War reliance on contractors for such jobs as providing security, interrogating prisoners, cooking meals, fixing equipment and constructing bases that were once reserved for soldiers.

Official numbers are difficult to find, said Deborah D. Avant, author of the 2005 book "The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security," but an estimated 9,200 contractors deployed during the Gulf War, a far shorter conflict without reconstruction projects. "This is the largest deployment of U.S. contractors in a military operation," said Avant, an associate professor at George Washington University.

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A Blackwater contractor who asked to be identified only as Rich rides in a South African anti-mine vehicle on the dangerous Baghdad Airport route. (By Ann Scott Tyson -- The Washington Post)

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In addition to about 140,000 U.S. troops, Iraq is now filled with a hodgepodge of contractors. DynCorp International has about 1,500 employees in Iraq, including about 700 helping train the police force. Blackwater USA has more than 1,000 employees in the country, most of them providing private security. Kellogg, Brown and Root, one of the largest contractors in Iraq, said it does not delineate its workforce by country but that it has more than 50,000 employees and subcontractors working in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kuwait. MPRI, a unit of L-3 Communications, has about 500 employees working on 12 contracts, including providing mentors to the Iraqi Defense Ministry for strategic planning, budgeting and establishing its public affairs office. Titan, another L-3 division, has 6,500 linguists in the country.

The Pentagon's latest estimate "further demonstrates the need for Congress to finally engage in responsible, serious and aggressive oversight over the questionable and growing U.S. practice of private military contracting," said Rep. Janice D. Schakowsky (D-Ill.), who has been critical of the military's reliance on contractors.

About 650 contractors have died in Iraq since 2003, according to Labor Department statistics.

Central Command, which conducted the census, said a breakdown by nationality or job description was not immediately available because the project is still in its early stages. "This is the first time we have initiated a census of this robustness," Lt. Col. Julie Wittkoff, chief of the contracting branch at Central Command, said in an interview. Those figures do not include subcontractors, which could substantially grow the figure.

In June, government agencies were asked to provide data about contractors working for them in Iraq, including their nationality, a description of their work and locations where they were working. The information was provided by more than a dozen entities within the Pentagon and a dozen outside agencies, including the departments of State and Interior, Wittkoff said. The count increased about 15 percent from about 87,000 since Central Command began keeping a tally this summer, she said, though the increase may reflect ongoing data collection efforts. The census will be updated quarterly, Wittkoff said.

Three years into the war, the headcount represents one of the Pentagon's most concrete efforts so far toward addressing the complexities and questions raised by the large numbers of civilians who have flooded into Iraq to work. With few industry standards, the military and contractors have sometimes lacked coordination, resulting in friendly fire incidents, according to a Government Accountability Office report last year.

"It takes a great deal of vigilance on the part of the military commander to ensure contractor compliance," said William L. Nash, a retired Army general and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "If you're trying to win

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nearts and minds and the contractor is driving 90 miles per hour through the streets and running over kids, that's not helping the image of the American army. The Iraqis aren't going to distinguish between a contractor and a soldier."

The census gives military commanders insight into the contractors operating in their region and the type of work they are doing, Wittkoff said. "It helps the combatant commanders have a better idea of . . . food and medical requirements they may need to provide to support the contractors," she said.

Staff writer Griff Witte contributed to this report.

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