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U.S. Said to Fund Afghan Warlords to Protect Convoys

By **DEXTER FILKINS**

KABUL, Afghanistan — American taxpayers have inadvertently created a network of warlords across [Afghanistan](#) who are making millions of dollars escorting [NATO](#) convoys and operating outside the control of either the Afghan government or the American and NATO militaries, according to the results of a Congressional investigation released Monday.

The investigation, begun last year by the House Subcommittee for National Security, found that money given to these Afghan warlords often amounts to little more than mafia-style protection payments, with some NATO convoys that refused to pay the warlords coming under attack.

The subcommittee, led by Representative John F. Tierney, Democrat of Massachusetts, also uncovered evidence suggesting that American taxpayer money is making its way to the [Taliban](#). Several trucking company supervisors told investigators that they believed the gunmen they hired to escort their convoys bribed the Taliban not to attack.

The warlords who are paid with American money, the investigators said, are undermining the legitimate Afghan government that Americans soldiers and [Marines](#) are struggling to build, and will most likely threaten the government long after the Americans and NATO leave.

The source of the taxpayer money is a \$2.1 billion contract called Host Nation Trucking, which pays for the movement of food and supplies to some 200 American bases across this arid, mountainous country, which in many places has no paved roads.

[The 79-page report, entitled "Warlord Inc.,"](#) paints an anarchic picture of contemporary Afghanistan, with the country's major highways being controlled by groups of freelance gunmen who answer to no one — and who are being paid for by the United States.

Afghanistan, the investigation found, plays host to hundreds of unregistered private security companies employing as many as 70,000 largely unsupervised gunmen.

“The principal private security subcontractors,” the report said, “are warlords, strongmen, commanders and militia leaders who compete with the Afghan central government for power and authority.

“The warlords thrive in a vacuum of government authority, and their interests are in fundamental conflict with U.S. aims to build a strong Afghan government,” the report said.

At the heart of the problem, the investigation found, is that the American military pays trucking companies to move its supplies across Afghanistan — and leaves it up to the trucking companies to protect themselves. The trucking companies in turn pay warlords and commanders to provide security.

These subcontracts, the investigation found, are handed out without any oversight from the Department of Defense, despite clear instructions from Congress that the department provide such oversight. The report states that military officers in Kabul had little idea whom the trucking companies were paying to provide security or how much they spent for it, and had rarely if ever inspected a convoy to find out.

The report recommends that the military award the trucking contracts and security contracts separately.

It also lists a number of warlords who control stretches of road in Afghanistan: Ruhullah, who like many Afghans goes by one name, has a reputation for dealing ruthlessly with the villages along the highways he controls; Matiullah Khan, whose 2,000-man militia controls the road between Kandahar and Tirinkot; and Abdul Razziq, the commander of the border police in Spin Boldak, one of the principal trucking routes into the country.

Mr. Ruhullah commands a force of about 600 gunmen that works for Watan Risk Management, a security firm overseen by Rashid and Rateb Popal, who are cousins of President [Hamid Karzai](#). In an interview last month, Rashid Popal denied that his company had paid any money to Taliban insurgents.

The report said Watan Risk Management and Mr. Ruhullah have been paid “several tens of millions of dollars” to escort NATO convoys.

“Long after the United States leaves Afghanistan, and the convoy security business shuts down, these warlords will likely continue to play a major role as autonomous centers of political, economic and military power,” the report said.

The report detailed episodes when trucking companies that refused to pay warlords to escort their trucks were attacked by the same men. A trucking company executive who refused to pay

Mr. Ruhullah told investigators that his trucks were attacked by Mr. Ruhullah's fighters. Mr. Ruhullah, the executive said, "is willing to ruthlessly exploit the lack of military control along the routes on which he operates."