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“War is Good for Business”: Contractors Ready to Cash In On ISIS War

September 17, 2014

Obama pledged that the war against ISIS won't be fought with U.S. ground troops. He didn't say anything about contractors, who see this as "the next big meal ticket."

America's rapidly-expanding war against ISIS won't involve large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground, President Obama is promising. And it's clear that airstrikes alone won't beat back the extremist group. Which means that if the President wants to have any hope of meeting his far-reaching goal of destroying ISIS, he's going to have to rely on private military contractors. At least, that's what the contractors are hoping. At the height of the Iraq war, these firms hired hundreds of thousands of people: guns-for-hire, IT geeks, logistics specialists, interrogators, and short order cooks to ladle out the slop at the military cafeteria. Over time, some of those contractors became the symbol for everything that was wrong with the Iraq war: hugely expensive, ineffective, and indifferent to Iraqi life. Contractors were at the middle of the war's biggest scandals, from Abu Ghraib to Nissour Square. And it was the abductions and murder of Blackwater contractors that sparked one of Iraq's biggest battles. None of the five current and former contractors who spoke with The Daily Beast expected a replay of last decade's Iraq war. But they all said a major opportunity was coming—both for them, and for Obama, who could use the private armies as a way to conceal just how many people will be fighting in this new conflict. “Iraq this time around is not going to be as big as it was before,” said Roger Carstens, a former special operations officer who has served as a contracted military adviser in Somalia and Afghanistan. “That said, this new war will present an opportunity for the companies that have a resident train and advising capability to contribute to this new effort.” President Obama has asked

Congress to authorize \$500 million to train a new Syrian opposition out of Saudi Arabia. That money would be part of a \$5 billion fund Obama requested this spring from Congress to help train and equip U.S. allies to fight terrorists.

One U.S. military contractor working in Iraq who asked not to be named said, “I can tell you the contractor-expat community is abuzz thinking this will lead to more work. We expect a much larger footprint than he is showing right now.”

Those expectations were whet earlier this summer, as ISIS was gaining ground in northern Iraq and the first U.S. special operations teams were arriving in Iraq, when the Pentagon asked military contractors to participate in two important surveys.

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The first one, issued in July, asked the industry to give a rough estimate of the costs associated with building a new network of ten ground based communications satellite stations, known as VSATs in military lingo. VSATs were used by the U.S. military in the last decade throughout Iraq to provide forward operating bases with secure internet and voice communications.

The second one was more specific. It asked for estimates of the cost for “Security Assistance Mentors and Advisers” for Iraq’s ministry of defense and the Iraqi Counterterrorism Service.

A Pentagon spokeswoman told the Daily Beast that the notice was not meant to be a request for proposal or the formal opening of the bidding process, but rather a chance to gauge the interest and capabilities of contractors down the road.

But contractors tell The Daily Beast that these bureaucratic notices—plus a pledge from Obama to wage a long war against ISIS and train up Syrian and Iraqi fighters—represent a business opportunity for an industry that has shrunk in recent years.

In 2008 there were 242,558 contractors working in the countries for U.S. Central Command, the area that includes Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen, three countries where the United States has helped train local forces and conducted air strikes, according to the Pentagon’s official estimate.

That was during the height of the last round of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By this July, that number had shrunk to 66,123, according to the Pentagon’s latest estimate of military contractors working in the countries covered by Central Command, with only 14,634 contractors operating outside of Afghanistan.

But that’s only a fraction of America’s privatized security apparatus operating overseas. The State Department also offers billions of dollars to conduct security for diplomats and other officials. In 2011, the State Department awarded Triple Canopy a four year deal worth up to \$1.5 billion to provide security for the airport in Baghdad, U.S. diplomats and other Americans

in the country. A State Department audit of the contract (PDF) found that at a minimum the State Department overpaid for those services by millions.

“There has been consolidation after conflicts,” said Doug Brooks, the president emeritus of the International Stability Operations Association, a trade association for professional military contractors. “There is going to be business, you could say these are shoes instead of boots on the ground. But as in most cases these are going to be local faces who will be hired by these companies, who bring professionalism and training. They have been there already helping to build up the air force in Iraq. It won’t be like the past ten years, but there will be growth in services.”

The shrinking market for military contractors led some of them to seek new patrons. In 2010, for example, an African based military contractor named Saracen began training an anti-piracy force in Somalia with funding from the United Arab Emirates. When this reporter visited the base in 2012, it was a privately-run outpost in Puntland with its own electricity generator, barracks, armory with former South African military officers giving basic training to locals.

But that experience led to some instability. After one of the South African trainers was murdered in 2012 by one of the recruits, the United Arab Emirates pulled out of the project.

One reason why the new war on ISIS won’t be like the old one against al Qaeda is because for now Obama has promised not to send ground forces to Iraq or Syria. The presence of U.S. forces overseas presents a number of opportunities for military contractors in providing everything from the dining facilities to the logistical transport for U.S. soldiers at war.

Also the budgets to fight al Qaeda and other groups expanded dramatically after 9/11 when many government institutions did not know exactly how to fight the new war. Blackwater—the private military firm founded by former NAVY SEAL Erik Prince—became a virtual extension of the CIA’s special activities division working to develop the deadly capability to target and kill al Qaeda operatives all over the world.

It was also Blackwater contractors working in Iraq to protect diplomatic convoys that shot what the Iraqi government said were 17 innocent protestors in the heart of Baghdad at Nisour Square. (This summer, in the U.S. trial of the contractors, former employees of the company said they were responding to fire from the crowd.)

The legacy of Nisour square contributed to the decision of the Iraqi government in 2011 to decline to offer legal immunity to U.S. soldiers and military contractors. Carstens said that any new military contracts for Iraq that would involve training units of soldiers would have to include iron-clad guarantees that the contractors themselves would not be targeted by Iraqi courts. “The companies will need to know that their contractors in Iraq and other places will have legal protections in case anything happens,” he said.

Iraq recently promised immunity for U.S. troops—and it’s likely Baghdad will do the same for contractors too. After all, Iraq’s government has also formally requested U.S. assistance in fighting ISIS and that help was clearly going to include military contractors.

“They are looking for the next big meal ticket and this could be it,” said Sean McFate, a former military contractor for Dyncorp and the author of *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order*. “The things they will provide are logistical support, training or retraining security forces.”

McFate said contractors gave Obama the opportunity to accomplish tasks normally associated with the U.S. military without sending boots on the ground. He said the training missions in particular “would look like Iraqi military boots on the ground and not the U.S. military.” But he said, “It’s a political disguise. This is an industry that is a proxy, it is creating the environment of security and protection without too many U.S. soldiers on the ground.”