

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 23, 2018

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Trump:

We are writing to urge you to oppose any efforts to privatize essential U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, including the privatization proposal advocated by former Blackwater USA Chief Executive Officer Erik Prince in recent meetings with Afghan Government officials. As evidenced by the lack of oversight and accountability that compromised the performance of Blackwater and other private military contractors during Operation Iraqi Freedom, the outsourcing of core military functions to a private security force comes at great risk to the safety of deployed U.S. military and civilian personnel in theatre and at an exorbitant cost to the American taxpayer.

In his current role as Executive Director and Chairman of the Frontier Services Group security firm, Mr. Prince continues to promote his plan to privatize the war in Afghanistan by replacing the estimated 23,000 American and NATO troops on the ground with a much smaller force primarily led by approximately 6,000 U.S. and multinational private security contractors. This private security force would be supplemented by 2,000 U.S. Special Operations Forces. According to the *New York Times*, Mr. Prince recently “made his sales pitch directly to a host of influential Afghans,” from “lowly militia commanders, to former cabinet officials and entrenched regional strongmen to several potential presidential candidates.” Over the course of his “lobbying circuit,” Mr. Prince was often introduced as “an adviser to Mr. Trump himself.” In support of his proposal, Mr. Prince has asserted that “cheaper private solutions” will “fill the gaps that plague the Afghan security forces, including reliable logistics and aviation support.” He has also predicted that “six months after the program is fully ramped up, you have a very different situation on the ground.”

We strongly oppose the outsourcing of core U.S. military functions and combat missions to mercenaries employed by “for-profit” corporate interests. We also believe that converting the world’s most effective fighting force into a commercial enterprise would tarnish the honor and diminish the sacrifice of those who have served our country. In total, acquiescing to Mr. Prince’s plan would gravely damage U.S. standing in the world.

Based on the extensive investigation conducted by our Committee during the 110th Congress into the use of Blackwater and other private security contractors in Iraq, it is clear that the outsourcing of core military functions in Afghanistan will serve to further destabilize the country and degrade the security of U.S. military and civilian personnel stationed in the region. Given the significant costs associated with a private security force, this proposal will also dramatically increase American spending on a war that the U.S. Department of Defense estimates has already cost American taxpayers more than \$718 billion since 2001.

The series of hearings that our Committee held in 2007 to examine Blackwater’s performance under more than \$1 billion in protective services contracts in Iraq revealed the inability of the U.S. Department of

State and the Defense Department to conduct any meaningful oversight of private security contractor activity. Between 2005 and 2007, Blackwater documented nearly 200 “escalation of force” incidents involving firearms discharges by company personnel. While Blackwater’s Iraq contracts with the federal government limited company security contractors to the defensive use of force, Blackwater fired the initial shots in more than 80 percent of these incidents. These cases were coupled with concerns on the part of U.S. military officials that Blackwater-related misconduct was worsening the security environment for U.S. forces in Iraq. Rather than initiating substantive post-incident reviews or investigations, the State Department primarily responded to these shooting incidents at the time by requesting that Blackwater issue compensation payments to the families of deceased Iraqi civilians.

To the detriment of our own congressional oversight, Blackwater repeatedly and without justification asserted that key internal incident reports had been classified by the Defense Department. The company even attempted to secure the classification of requested documents that had been marked as unclassified. In the meantime, our Committee determined that Blackwater had charged the U.S. Government \$1,222 per day for the services of a private military contractor, amounting to an annual salary of approximately \$445,000 or a markup of six times the salary of an equivalent U.S. soldier. A June 2009 audit issued by the Office of Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction also found that the U.S. Government failed to assess approximately \$55 million in contractual penalties stemming from Blackwater’s manpower shortages and failure to fully staff its protective details for U.S. officials. The Iraqi Government ultimately banned Blackwater from operating in the country following an escalation of force incident in Nisour Square in September 2007 that resulted in the death of 17 Iraqi civilians.

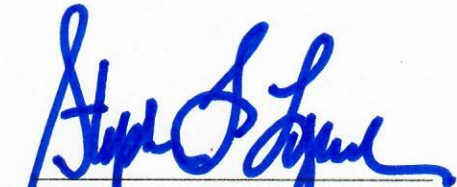
The U.S. military mission in Afghanistan would not be well served by such a lack of accountability and transparency. Over the past year, the security climate in Afghanistan has continued to deteriorate as the Taliban insurgency perpetrates regular attacks against American soldiers, Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (“ANDSF”) personnel, government officials, political candidates, and civilians. This month witnessed the eighth U.S. military death in Afghanistan in 2018 and an average of between 30 to 40 ANDSF casualties and at least ten civilian casualties in Afghanistan per day. While the country held long-delayed parliamentary elections this past weekend, more than one-third of polling stations located in areas controlled or influenced by the Taliban were closed due to security concerns. At least ten parliamentary candidates were killed in the lead-up to the elections. According to estimates provided by Afghan Government officials after polls closed, Taliban attacks against districts and polling centers killed nearly 80 people, including 28 ANDSF members, during voting and wounded at least 470 individuals. Based on the latest *Quarterly Report to Congress* issued by the Office of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (“SIGAR”), district control has become increasingly contested between the Afghan Government and Taliban insurgent groups, with 122 districts, or 30 percent of all Afghan districts, now categorized as contested. Moreover, SIGAR reports that at an estimated 314,242 personnel, the ANDSF is operating 37,758 personnel short, or at only 89.3 percent, of its authorized goal strength.

To make matters worse, Members of Congress are presently limited in our ability to evaluate the effectiveness of our military strategy and operations in Afghanistan following a decision undertaken by the Defense Department, at the apparent request of the Afghan Government, to classify critical data pertaining to the strength and performance of the ANDSF. According to SIGAR, data related to ANDSF casualties and exact attrition figures for the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police remain classified. In addition, the Defense Department has newly-classified general performance assessment data for the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Interior. Accessibility to this previously-public data is essential for Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to assess the success of our current combat mission in the region, let alone consider a wholesale transition to a private security force.


We concur with the strong concerns expressed by senior military officials within your Administration regarding the potential privatization of the war in Afghanistan. According to Secretary of Defense James Mattis, “[w]hen the Americans put their nation’s credibility on the line, privatizing is probably not a wise idea.” Similarly, Gen. Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command, recently stated: “Well, the most significant downside is that we turn our – turn our national interest over to contractors... And as the secretary of defense has said, I don’t think this is a very – very good strategy.” These and other U.S. officials have also underscored that central Afghan Government officials are vehemently opposed to the presence of a privatized security force, a factor that could undermine the existing Bilateral Security Accord between the U.S. and Afghanistan. In a speech this month, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that “foreign mercenaries will never be allowed in this country” and that he will explore all viable legal options “against those who try to privatize war on our land.”

For these reasons, we again urge you to oppose the privatization of our core military functions in Afghanistan. Thank you in advance for your consideration and please do not hesitate to contact us directly if you have any questions regarding this matter.

Sincerely,



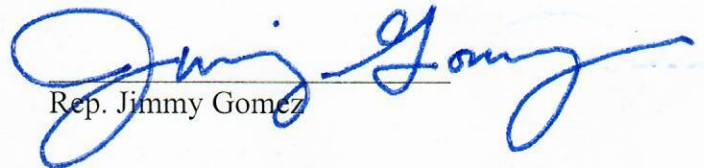
Rep. Stephen F. Lynch
Ranking Member



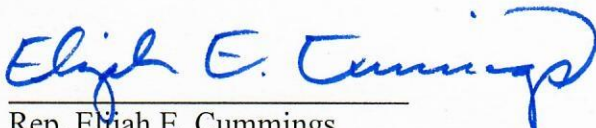
Rep. Peter Welch



Rep. Mark DeSaulnier



Rep. Jimmy Gomez



Rep. Elijah E. Cummings
Ex Officio