

By Spencer Ackerman

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An Afghan soldier in Helmand Province prepares to burn a marijuana field as part of "Operation Crack Back," 2011. Photo: Flickr/ [ISAF](#)

The U.S. war in Afghanistan is supposed to be winding down. Its contractor-led drug war? Not so much.

Inside a compound in Kabul called Camp Integrity, the Pentagon stations a small group of officers to oversee the U.S. military's various operations to curb the spread of Afghanistan's cash crops of heroin and marijuana, which help line the Taliban's pockets. Only Camp Integrity isn't a U.S. military base at all. It's the [10-acre Afghanistan headquarters of the private security company formerly known as Blackwater](#).

Those officers work for an obscure Pentagon agency called the Counter Narco-Terrorism Program Office, or CNTPO. Quietly, it's grown into one of the biggest dispensers of cash for private security contractors in the entire U.S. government: One pile of contracts last year from CNTPO was worth more than \$3 billion. And it sees a future for itself in Afghanistan over the long haul.

Earlier this month, a U.S. government solicitation sought to hire a security firm to help CNTPO "[maintain a basic, operational support cell](#)" in Kabul. Army Lt. Col. James Gregory, a Pentagon spokesman, explains that "cell" doesn't kick in the doors of any Afghan narco-kingpins. It handles the more mundane tasks of overseeing the contracts of the Pentagon's counter-narcotics programs, from "training and linguists, and [providing] supplies, such as vehicles and equipment." The solicitation, however, indicates those services aren't going anywhere: When all the options are exercised, the contract extends through September 29, 2015, over a year past the date when Afghan soldiers and cops are supposed to take over the war. And the "government preferred location" to base CNTPO? Camp Integrity.

The envisioned Pentagon counter-narco-terrorism staff is pretty small: only two to four personnel. But protecting them at Camp Integrity is serious business. The November 6 solicitation calls for a security firm that can "provide a secure armory and weapons maintenance service, including the ability to check-in and check-out weapons and ammunition," particularly 9 mm pistols and M4 rifles; and to provide "secure armored" transportation to the CNTPO team — primarily "in and around Kabul, but could include some remote locations."

CNTPO has a longstanding relationship with Blackwater, the infamous security firm that is now known as Academi. In 2009, it gave Blackwater a contract to train Afghan police, and company

employees used that contract to [requisition guns from the U.S. military for their private use](#) . Although that contract was [ultimately taken out of CNTPO's hands](#) , the office's relationship with Academi/Blackwater endures. Last year, Academi told Danger Room it has a contract with CNTPO, worth an undisclosed amount, to provide "[all-source intelligence analyst support and material procurement](#)" for Afghanistan. An Academi spokeswoman, Kelley Gannon, declined to comment on Academi's relationship with CNTPO, or whether it'll bid on the new contract.

But its deal with Academi is just a small slice of CNTPO's efforts. It's got a sprawling mandate to fight drugs and terrorism. Last year, [CNTPO offered security firms at least \\$3 billion](#) , *excluding* the re-up options, for tasks as diverse as training Azerbaijani commandos and "airlift services in the trans-Sahara region of Africa." Some of its tasks appear to have little connections to either counterterrorism *or* counternarcotics, like "media analysis and web-site development consultation to officials of the Government of Pakistan."

All that points to an enduring role for the military going after drugs and drug money in Afghanistan. It's certainly an enduring *problem*: On Tuesday, the United Nations found that Afghan poppy cultivation [rose nearly 20 percent over the past two years](#) , especially in the southwestern Helmand province. Just last week, the U.S. military took the unusual step of classifying Mullah Naim Barich, the top Taliban operative in Helmand, as a "[significant foreign narcotics trafficker or kingpin](#)" , allowing the U.S. to target companies that do business with him.

But the U.S. mission in Afghanistan isn't supposed to be about going after drugs anymore. It wasn't one of the residual missions that Gen. Joseph Dunford, President Obama's nominee to run the Afghanistan war, [described to the Senate last week](#) . But since the Pentagon gives its counter-drug/counter-terrorism operations such a broad mission, a residual force in Afghanistan might find itself going after Barich and his illicit colleagues for years to come, all supported from Academi's Kabul compound.

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