

The State Department suddenly canceled a contract for eight private investigators to assist U.S. officials in Iraq in "extremely complex and sensitive investigations," after a senator raised questions about whether the department had outsourced oversight of security contractors.

The eight were working at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, assigned to the agency's Regional Security Office to examine incidents involving U.S. personnel as part of a new Force Investigation Unit.

The unit was created after an incident last year in which 17 Iraqi civilians were allegedly killed by private security guards from the firm Blackwater, which was hired to protect State Department officials. When the agency announced the Baghdad unit last October, Undersecretary for Management Patrick F. Kennedy told reporters that no contractors would be part of the investigative teams, which would be "composed of State Department employees."

Sen. Russell Feingold (D-Wis.) wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Sept. 19, advising her that he had just learned that the private investigators were working in Iraq. Feingold, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, wrote, "It is highly troubling that the Department is apparently outsourcing oversight of its security contractors."

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