



Under the cover of a benign government information-gathering program, a Defense Department official set up a network of private contractors in Afghanistan and Pakistan to help track and kill suspected militants, according to military officials and businessmen in Afghanistan and the United States.

The official, Michael D. Furlong, hired contractors from private security companies that employed former C.I.A. and Special Forces operatives. The contractors, in turn, gathered intelligence on the whereabouts of suspected militants and the location of insurgent camps, and the information was then sent to military units and intelligence officials for possible lethal action in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the officials said.

While it has been widely reported that the C.I.A. and the military are attacking operatives of Al Qaeda and others through unmanned, remote-controlled drone strikes, some American officials say they became troubled that Mr. Furlong seemed to be running an off-the-books spy operation. The officials say they are not sure who condoned and supervised his work.

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