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Book Review
Bülent Sungur (2025) *The Oversight of Outsourcing US Intelligence after 9/11: Private Intelligence Contractors*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 318 pp., ISBN: 978-3-031-82041-0

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Some private military companies (PMCs), such as Blackwater, became infamous following their extensive involvement in American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout the 2000s (Scahill, 2008). Although not raising as much controversy as PMCs with their presence on the battlefield, private sector contractors also increasingly expanded into the intelligence community. Bülent Sungur's recent book, *The Oversight of Outsourcing US Intelligence After 9/11*, contributes to security privatisation scholarship by providing an analysis of the involvement of private intelligence contractors (PICs) in intelligence activities after 9/11 and the associated oversight considerations arising from this participation. Sungur's book contributes to the existing scholarship on intelligence outsourcing, such as Daricili's (2019) and Voelz's (2009) examinations of the intelligence roles that have been played by private contractors. Previous literature has also addressed the legal frameworks and compliance responsibilities governing the public and private sectors in intelligence (Michaels, 2008) as well as the evolution of contracting relationships. Sungur, however, specifically contributes to theoretical engagement on the subject by employing the principal–agent theory to analyse the relationship between PICs (the primary agent) and the American people (the primary principal), the US intelligence community, the President, and the Congress throughout the war on terror. The main themes that emerge throughout the book pertain to the rationales and consequences

associated with outsourcing intelligence functions as well as the politicisation and mismanagement of intelligence by the American executive.

To argue that the intelligence community's heavy reliance on PICs after 9/11 created oversight problems, particularly for Congress, Sungur examines the principal–agent relationship using three case studies: the mismanagement of contractors over the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction issue, PIC's misconduct at Abu Ghraib, and the outsourcing of US covert operations in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. None of these examinations are particularly new, as each intelligence failure has been examined thoroughly, often due to the abundance of the existing investigations and data. For example, the theory employed and the issue of misconduct at Abu Ghraib are also covered in Van Puyvelde's (2019) book titled *Outsourcing US intelligence: Contractors and Government Accountability*. However, Sungur's work is in fact different and complementary. Sungur argues that the cases have been selected due to a new argument—each issue represents a "shift" in the evolution of outsourcing intelligence. He suggests that there have been differences throughout the war on terror regarding the types of specific intelligence tasks outsourced; he also highlights the extent to which PICs have become a vital part of the US intelligence community. Sungur effectively demonstrates that the roles of PICs are multifaceted and that the power of contractors has increased in several circumstances.

The introductory chapter introduces the analytical framework and plan of the book. In the first chapter, Sungur clearly outlines his sound justifications for examining the United States (the high percentage of US intelligence budget spent on contracts as well as the amount of available and credible information on intelligence oversight) and defines the key concepts used throughout the book, including PICs and intelligence writ large. Sungur casts a wide net regarding the types of contractors he considers to be PICs, making it initially unclear how the term can be distinguished or separated from other private actors examined in other scholarship, such as PMCs. Nonetheless, he clearly links the roles of these contractors to the intelligence cycle and intelligence objectives throughout the empirical chapters. Chapter 2 comprehensively and relevantly examines the evolution of the intelligence mission in the United States as well as the congressional and executive oversight mechanisms, including the legal bases for outsourcing intelligence.

Chapters 3–5 are the empirical case studies. Each empirical chapter begins with a background on the delegated task and the role of the contractors, followed by an analysis of how the existing monitoring and control mechanisms failed to detect issues related to the role, hiring, and structure of PICs, drawing on the concepts from McCubbins and Schwartz (1984) on police-patrol and fire-alarm oversight. The chapters proceed to discuss how an intelligence failure occurred in each case and how third parties noticed and/or informed the principals about taking measures, again using McCubbins and Schartz's (1984) conceptual framework. The application of both principal–agent theory and oversight concepts is straightforward, but Sungur occasionally conflates his units of analysis. He argues that the American people are the main principal; however, this does not always translate to the analysis in each of the case studies.

Sungur emphasises the executive's role in the intelligence failures associated with private sector involvement. Some scholars have also explored this perspective. For example, Michaels (2008) conducted a study on public–private intelligence partnerships in the war on terror. He introduces the argument that the executive is motivated to conduct intelligence policy through collaborations with corporations despite potential legal, political, and economic risks in order to gain power and discretion. However, this is not elaborated extensively, as Michaels mainly focuses on how to shift compliance responsibilities away from intelligence officials and onto corporations. Sungur's work advances scholarship by

empirically expanding on the idea that the executive is actively complicit in private intelligence issues and mismanagement. With this focus, the book does occasionally feel slightly conspiratorial, with the author referencing the president's "hidden agenda" that allegedly facilitates the growing use of PICs. Nonetheless, Sungur convincingly demonstrates that systems of intelligence oversight in the United States are ineffective at best and corrupt at worst.

Sungur's book also contributes to foundational work, such as that of Chesterman (2008), which explains issues in the oversight of outsourced intelligence functions. Chesterman argues that challenges stem from the necessary topical secrecy that limits oversight, differing incentives for private versus public employees, and the uncertainty about which functions can be delegated to private actors and which should stay within the government. Sungur's analysis is innovative in that it not only contributes to explaining oversight issues with his examination of the executive's role but also explores the downstream consequences of these challenges by examining how the legislative branch tries to address oversight issues. Each of the empirical chapters conclude by discussing executive and legislative principals' responses to the intelligence failures and whether new reforms were introduced to prevent further violations of the rules.

From an evidentiary standpoint, Sungur uses data from official documents, including congressional hearings, reports, testimonies, executive branch investigations, and other primary sources. Information from the reports of international organisations, periodicals, and civilian survey agencies is used as a secondary source. Methodologically, Sungur claims to use process-tracing, although this approach is not made overly evident in the book until the concluding chapter, which summarises the findings of the case studies in relation to his hypotheses and provides recommendations for further research in the field. Although he does reference that a specific piece of evidence points to "an indication of hypothesis x being correct," additional explanation of his use of the methodology would have been valuable, embedded within the empirical chapters. Additionally, Sungur does not adequately address other potential causes of intelligence oversight issues beyond the use of PICs. Although he does not clearly define the types of relationships he is looking for through the investigation, they are at best probabilistic, rather than deterministic.

The methodological structure, approach to content organisation, and theoretical engagement result in the book being mainly for those studying the privatisation of security, rather than a policy-oriented audience. Even while acknowledging some of the issues raised, overall, Sungur's contribution has significant relevance to the academic field, primarily due to the value of the analytical framework he introduces and employs throughout the book, enabling comprehensive coverage of the principal–agent relationship with potential applicability beyond the actors outlined. Specifically, Sungur's framework has the potential to address a gap in the literature regarding private intelligence outsourcing outside of the American context. Few authors have explored this topic in other geographic areas, especially in non-Western countries. While much of the private intelligence outsourcing has previously focused on governments as clients, emerging research is exploring outsourcing for corporate risk mitigation (Tucker and Robson-Morrow, 2025). Sungur's theoretical framework could therefore also potentially be tested within private/private sector relationships.

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