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Outsourcing the War on Terror? The Use of Private Military and Security Companies after 9/11

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Ten years after the launching of a global war on terror, private military and security companies (PMSCs) have become a familiar picture in today's strategic landscape. In the wake of 9/11, private actors have played an increasingly crucial role at both sides of the conflict. Not only is the war on terror a response to the unprecedented threat posed by non-state actors such as terrorist networks; it is also a conflict characterized by a growing role of commercial actors supporting bureaucracies and military organizations by performing functions such as logistical support, armed security, intelligence and security sector reform.

PMSCs' employees, usually referred to as private military contractors, have been involved in some of the most salient and controversial episodes of the latest conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Back in April 2004, it was the highly publicized killing and maiming of four employees of the firm Blackwater that triggered the first battle of Fallujah, the largest combat engagement since the end of major hostilities in Iraq[1]. Few months later, three CACI and Titan contractors working as translators and interrogators were found involved in prisoners' abuse in Abu Ghraib[2]. In September 2007, 18 Iraqi civilians were shot dead by Blackwater contractors escorting a diplomatic motorcade[3]. Further controversy was later on raised by the involvement of the same firm –then rebranded Xe – in the arming of unmanned aerial vehicles employed to hunt terrorists in Southern Afghanistan[4]. Such episodes raised unprecedented public attention to the role of private military and security companies in today's conflicts, triggering a heated discussion over the appropriateness of privatizing certain functions to commercial firms.

The current debate, however, has not always provided an accurate picture of the role played by PMSCs in today's conflicts. The unprecedented academic and journalistic attention given to the role of contractors, together with the Weberian notion of a monopoly of legitimate violence as the core defining feature of the state, has created the impression that today's PMSCs represent an entirely new phenomenon. This, however, is far from being the case. A state monopoly of legitimate violence should be seen as the exception rather than the rule, as commercial actors involved in the provision of extraterritorial coercion such as mercenaries and privateers have always existed in the international landscape, partially disappearing only in the 20th century[5]. Even then, however, civilian personnel involved in the provision of logistics and maintenance never ceased to support military organizations. U.S. military operations are a case in point: far from being a novelty, contractors played a significant role in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Bosnia and Kosovo[6]. Indeed, the origins of today's military privatization can be traced back to factors that long pre-existed today's war on terror, such as the rise of neoliberalism, the shrinking of military budgets and personnel following the end of the Cold War, and the increasing need for technological expertise that can no longer be kept within the ranks[7].

Size and functions of contractor support in the war on terror

While not new, the resort to PMSCs during the war on terror has certainly been unprecedented in both size and scope. While a ratio of one contractor deployed for each U.S. soldier already characterized U.S. military engagements in former Yugoslavia, such operations saw the deployment of less than 20,00 troops involved in peacekeeping rather than combat missions[8]. This resulted in a much lower and less controversial involvement of contractors than in current counterinsurgency operations. The war in Iraq represents a watershed not only in the

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number of contracted personnel, but also in the range of functions outsourced to the private sector, which has encompassed a much greater number of private security personnel, seeing contractors involved in other sensitive tasks such as reconnaissance and target acquisition, human intelligence, training of the Iraqi military and police, interrogations and prisoners' detainment. Analogous reliance of U.S. forces on contractor support also characterizes the latest phases of operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Contrary to what a part of the debate assumes, the activities carried out by PMSCs do not usually fall under the rubric of combat. To be sure, some of the functions now performed by PMSCs have given civilian contractors a significant responsibility in the use of lethal force, raising legal as well as ethical issues^[9]. For instance, unmanned aerial vehicles have reportedly been operated by contractors until they reached the target of the bombing, being replaced by military personnel only at the moment of pushing the fire button.^[10] Also, while private security contractors are meant to perform defensive tasks only, their massive use to guard buildings and escort military convoys and diplomatic motorcades in the theatre of an insurgency resulted very often in their exposure to and involvement in firefights. To date, security contractors have largely monopolized scholarly attention. While this is understandable given the incidents involving contractors openly carrying arms and the concern for human right violations, contracted personnel supporting military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have performed a much larger variety of functions. As of June 2009, when Department of Defense (DoD) reliance on private security reached its peak, only 13,145 contractors – about 13% of DoD contracted workforce in the theatre – were performing security functions^[11]. To be sure, armed security was also performed by most of the contractors working for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development, and many other armed contractors, while not directly hired by the U.S. government, have indirectly contributed to securing the country by protecting its economic infrastructure and supporting international organizations, NGOs and private firms involved in reconstruction efforts. Most U.S. government contractors in Iraq, however, have been employed for activities falling under the rubric of unarmed support, such as catering and cleaning inside military bases, construction, maintenance, transportation, communication, translation.

Although they do not amount to combat, such support services are crucial for the performing of military operations. Military power is not only determined by combat effectiveness, but also by the capacity to readily deploy and reliably sustain military forces in a theatre of operations through an effective logistical supply chain. As logistics is one of the four branches of military art, the privatization of support functions has played a crucial role in augmenting state force projection capabilities by acting as a force multiplier and freeing up all the available uniformed personnel for combat tasks. ^[12]

Contractors and U.S. military efforts: a new military format

The unprecedented role of the private sector in supporting the latest US-led operations is epitomized by the size of contracted workforce. As of July 2007, DoD contractors in Iraq were about 190,000 versus 160,000 troops^[13]. In Afghanistan too, civilian workforce significantly outnumbered military personnel. As of September 2009, DoD contractors amounted to 104,100 units compared to only 63,950 troops^[14]. Such figures, referring to DoD workforce only, do not encompass contractors hired by other U.S. agencies such as State Department and USAID, composed as of 2010 by 19,310 and 35,768 contractors respectively^[15].

Nor has the percentage of contractors versus soldiers significantly decreased in the latest years. Although the Obama Administration has taken steps to reduce its reliance on contracted workforce and re-insource certain functions^[16], the number of contractors vis-à-vis uniformed personnel has remained around or above a 1:1 ratio in both Afghanistan and Iraq. As of Iraq, the total number of contractors has certainly decreased, but comparatively less than that of uniformed personnel. Indeed, the withdrawal of military personnel has translated into a new spike in the ratio of contractors versus soldiers, which in December 2010 amounted to 71,143 and 47,300 respectively^[17].

Another indicator of the crucial role played by contractors in counterinsurgency efforts is the fact that, while not directly providing combat functions, U.S. contracted workforce has heavily suffered from casualties. In the first half of 2010, more contractors than uniformed personnel died in both Afghanistan and Iraq^[18]. Overall, the number of reported fatalities among contracted personnel as of the first quarter of 2011 amounted to 2300 units, more than 25%

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of U.S. total casualties^[19] in the two theatres. Such figures are in danger of being grossly underestimated, as they comprise only fatalities filed to the U.S. Department of Labour for insurance claims[20]. Looking at contractors' fatalities over the years shows a sharp increase in the human costs suffered by contractors, which have largely remained ignored by the broader public and have not been publicized by U.S. decision-makers.

Beyond the U.S: contractors and British military efforts

To date, scholarly attention has almost exclusively focused on contractors hired by the U.S. government. While the U.S. government is certainly the greatest customer of the military support industry, PMSCs have also been increasingly resorted to by a number of other states involved in the war on terror. For instance, after the withdrawal of Italian soldiers voted by the Italian parliament in 2005, private security contractors have been hired to protect its Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq[21].

A huge resort to private military contractors has also characterized the latest British operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Like the State Department and USAID, the British Foreign Office and Department for International Development have also significantly relied on private security personnel for the protection of their personnel abroad. While the British Ministry of Defence has stated a commitment to outsource armed functions only in exceptional circumstances, it has also shown a strong willingness to privatize unarmed military support services. At the moment of writing, the British MoD has outsourced both home and overseas base support, transportation, weapon maintenance and communication[22]. This, in turn, has also resulted in an indirect reliance on the commercial provision of armed support, as contractors transporting fuel, food and equipment throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan had to resort to local private security companies as subcontractors to escort their convoys^[23].

Figures concerning British contractor support are fewer and more approximate than those available for the United States. The only data available, collected in 2010 by a private consultancy looking at British operations in Afghanistan, refer to the presence on the ground of about 9,500 soldiers supported by at least 6,500 contractors[24]. Hence, contractors in Afghanistan are said to correspond to about 40-45% of the total force.

In addition, British contractors have also heavily suffered from casualties. Available figures refer to over 500 casualties among contracted personnel deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan between 2003 and 2010^[25]. Again, these figures may be grossly underestimated, as they are unlikely to cover the entirety of local contractors and subcontractors. While inferior to their U.S. counterparts in absolute terms, fatalities among UK contractors prove even more outstanding when compared to casualties among British soldiers, now amounting to 559 units[26]. Hence, reported fatalities among UK contractors almost equate casualties occurred among British soldiers.

Outsourcing a counterinsurgency: a suboptimal military strategy?

Such figures show that both U.S. and U.K. operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been characterized by a new type of military format based on a smaller number of military professionals focusing on combat exclusively and a greater number of contractors carrying out crucial support functions and increasingly sharing the human costs of conflict.

While the role of PMSCs in supporting the war on terror has been crucial, controversy does not only surround the legal and ethical implications of deploying massive numbers of civilian personnel in harm's way and give contractors operating outside a chain of command and a system of military justice a significant responsibility in the use of lethal force. For a number of reasons, the strategic effectiveness of operations based on such a massive contractor support also remains contentious.

First, PMSCs have often reportedly provided personnel who were not qualified to perform their contractual obligations.[27] Moreover, there is ample evidence that the presence of contractors in Iraq created problems of communication, command and control, as epitomized by the frequent cases of friendly fire between contracted and uniformed personnel: between January and May 2005 only, twenty incidents were reported^[28]. Also, civilian contractors unaccountable to military justice can quit their jobs without being prosecuted for desertion, endangering

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the logistical supply chain. In Iraq, some firms suspended operations because they found the local environment too dangerous[29]. Third, PMSCs are in danger of undermining the success of counterinsurgency operations. Advocates of outsourcing argue that the resort to local contractors boosts the local economy and helps fostering ties with the civilian population. While this may certainly hold true, the vulnerabilities arising from the use of local contractors who can only be approximately vetted are manifold. As recently found out by the U.S. Senate, huge reliance on local contractors in Afghanistan led to the employment of personnel handing money, weapons and intelligence to the Taliban^[30]. The massive resort to third-country contractors occurred in Iraq^[31] has not been less problematic. In particular, many have argued that the resort to armed contractors may be detrimental to operational efforts. U.S. doctrine on counterinsurgency has forcefully emphasized that “security force abuses ... can be major escalating factors for insurgencies”[32]. For this reason, counterinsurgency requires a careful balance between the use of force against insurgents and the need to prevent collateral damage among the local population that the presence of contractors operating outside the military chain of command may alter. As argued in 2007 by then Senator Obama, the United States ‘cannot win a fight for hearts and minds when we outsource critical missions to unaccountable contractors’.[33] Not only private security personnel but all types of contractors may be detrimental to counterinsurgency efforts, as foreigners are seen as an extraneous presence stealing jobs from locals and boosting inflation[34]. While coordination with and oversight of private military contractors have certainly improved in the latest years, the entirety of the problems mentioned above has proved difficult to solve.

Conclusions

Contractor support provided a valuable contribution to U.S. and U.K efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, permitting a long-term engagement that has proved to be incompatible with current military force structure and providing military organizations with linguistic, managerial and technological skills that were missing from the ranks. However, evidence also shows that the resort to contractors in the wake of the War on Terror has created a number of problematic consequences, proving particularly challenging in the context of counterinsurgency operations. Rather than the only or the most effective option at hand, the massive privatization of military support in the wake of the war on terror can be best understood as an alternative way to generate military power that came to be preferred to other courses of action on political grounds. On the one hand, the unilateral way in which the conflict against Iraq was launched and the unwillingness of the United States to compromise over the content of the war on terror so as to share the burden of the conflict with its allies has encouraged the purchase of additional military capabilities on the market rather than the achievement of greater support from other countries through diplomatic channels[35]. On the other, the resort to the market has arguably come to be seen as an easier way to generate additional manpower due to the constraints imposed on traditional ways to mobilize societal resources for military efforts such as a reinstatement of the draft or a thorough activation of reserve forces.

In spite of being conceived as the response to an existential threat to Western civilization, the war on Terror has not substantially differed from the humanitarian conflict of the Nineties in decision-makers’ unwillingness or incapacity to deploy high numbers of boots on the ground in harm’s way[36]. Evidence shows that in the U.K. and in the U.S. alike, contractors’ deployments and casualties are less visible and less politically sensitive than those of their military counterparts. As the privatization of military support has reduced the visible costs of the war on terror and their domestic consequences, reliance on PMSCs can be seen as the attempt to achieve greater political rather than merely financial cost-effectiveness in the projection of force abroad. Looking at military privatization as an explicit policy choice pursued by Western-decision makers evokes at least two concerns. First, outsourcing may create the conditions for greater unilateralism, as additional military capabilities can now be purchased on the market rather than achieved through alliance politics. On the other, the possibility to reduce the visible costs of military operations and circumvent parliamentary veto points may magnify the autonomy of the executive branch and challenge democratic control over the use of force[37]. Although the resort to private military contractors has become an inescapable feature of today’s war on terror as well as future conflicts, the legal, democratic and strategic consequences of such a practice, briefly mentioned in this article, still remain to be addressed.

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revolve around the different ways in which states generate military power and their political, diplomatic and strategic consequences. By drawing on historical sociology and neoclassical realism, he is investigating the connection between domestic constraints over the conversion of societal resources into military power and the use of private military companies (PMSCs) in both the United States and the United Kingdom. He also works on the connection between bureaucratic politics, strategic cultures and the tendency to privatize certain military functions. In addition, his research interests also focus on the regulation of PMSCs, democratic control over the use of force, civil-military relations and security sector reform.

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