Identity and Security: PSCs as a Solution and a Dilemma

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When classifying one's identity one recognizes the self by first recognizing "the other" (Wendt in Greenhill 2008). This creates a widely accepted dichotomy of "us" and "them." One constructs his or her own identity by un-identifying with and excluding "the other." This pattern is similar when considering the realm of security. Security means being protected from something unsecure. Indeed, "We" need to protect ourselves from the enemy, the "other," again, creating an "us" and "them" division. The initial problem with this, then, is the labeling of the "us" and "them," and defining identities in general. Bringing security into this dynamic creates questions of who should be secure? From whom, by whom, and who decides? In a democracy, it is understood it should be the institutions of the state itself that provide security to its citizens. Though, often times a formal structure of democracy is lacking and leaders and governments are inept at providing a sense of safety and security to their citizens. In these circumstances, it is often necessary for an outside party to intervene in order to secure the situation and ensure the universal and equal distribution of security within the state. It is here where private security companies (PSCs) can assist in stabilizing post-conflict regions and begin the organized and safe reconstruction of weak states. However, while initially providing support for the development of these weak nations, PSCs can ultimately contribute to their overall debility creating a sense of dependency, formulating new insecurities, and ultimately preventing the states from achieving their own independence and ability to protect themselves. This paper will introduce the complications of identity in relation to the state and security. It will then present PSCs and how they can offer a security alternative when the state is unable to perform, but show how they can, in turn, create further insecurity and ultimately undermine the role of the state and democracy overall.

Identity, the State, and Security

It can be a common misconception in international relations that identities and national interest are inherently connected, related, and assumed. The most notable aspects of identity are that there is not one clean-cut definition as to what identity may constitute, how it may be labeled or observed spatially, and also that it has the ability to change and develop over time. In their analysis of the relationship between identity and conflict, Erik Gartzke and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch assert that "existing work treats identity and culture as attributes of nation states, typically based on either the numerically or politically dominant ethnic group," which therefore leads to the assumption that "states are homogenous when in fact almost all nation states are not, and usually encompass more than one ethnic group, with multiple bases for shared or different identities" (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006, p. 61). In reality, "state borders do not line up with ethnic group boundaries" (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006, p. 62) and nation states are not defined by one shared identity. This can be problematic when attempting to distinguish a common national identity that needs to be protected.

In regards to security, it is essential to determine the referent object that is to be secured (Collins 2007, p. 2). This can be challenging for multiple reasons. First, when states are constructed without taking into account previously established ethnic boundaries, as can be seen in post-colonial structured nations in Africa and states in the former Soviet Union, clashing identities and cultures can often end up within the same borders. As Gartzke and Gleditsch point out, it is necessary to notice the "relative frequency of clashes *within* civilizations" (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006, p. 57). When opposing entities exist within states and national territories, internal conflicts and civil wars are highly probable and the question of whom to secure from whom is problematic. When the enemy is within the same state, or when the enemy runs the state, how can security be evenly dispersed and how can states obtain stability?

Second, it is difficult to determine one distinct and static identity that will need to be secured constantly over time. In her research of Mayan women and how the subject is constructed and secured, Maria Stern observes that "a subject is too large, excessive, messy, fluid, changing, contradictory and unbounded to be adequately or fully represented or therewith secured. It is always 'becoming'" (Stern 2006, p. 201). Throughout history it is evident that "identity and interests are not fixed over time and space and are open to change and revision," and further that "the identity and interest of states differs over time and place," as well (Agius 2007, p. 52). As individuals and events can constantly influence the labels of identity, it is clear identity is something that is constantly in flux and that "is malleable" (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2006, p. 64).

Private Security: A Solution

When a collective national identity is lacking within a state, or when identities clash and cause internal violence and conflict, it is sometimes a positive alternative for an outside actor to intervene in national security measures. Again, in many post-colonial and post-regime states, "ethnic manipulation or the 'politics of identity'" occur in order to keep a previous regime in power and to oppress minority citizens (Jackson 2007, pp. 192-3). In their analyses of security sector reform (SSR), Rita Abrahamsen and Michael C. Williams stress the importance of incorporating private security into current reforms in developing and post-conflict nations. In these weak nations there is often "ineffective and untrustworthy public security institutions," and further "as police and military personnel have failed not only to offer adequate protection, but also have themselves become major sources of insecurity" citizens more frequently turn to private alternatives to ensure their safety (Abrahamsen and Williams 2006, p. 2). Since the 1980s there has been major growth in the private security sector and Abrahamsen and Williams credit this to the growing failure of public institutions within weak states to protect their populations: "In many countries, people have little confidence and trust in the police and the military, whose personnel are often noted for their brutality and dishonesty, and many therefore prefer private security" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2006, p. 7).

Joakim Berndtsson further explores the presence of private security throughout history highlighting the financial advantages of turning to non-state actors for protection. He notes that individual and developing states have turned to this alternative because "hired armies and mercenary units provided quick access to trained forces that could be raised on short notice and dismissed when they were no longer needed" (Berndtsson 2009, p. 91). This allowed states and rulers to "decrease the strain on their economies by lowering the costs of protection for themselves, but also through increasing the costs of protection for competitors" (Berndtsson 2009, p. 91).

In the modern-day, the use of PSCs as economic support continues. In post-conflict countries such as in Sierra Leone, a Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program has been implemented which helps many out of work ex-military and police reintegrate into society. The DDR program offers training for these citizens in carpentry, taxi-driving, IT skills, and the like, but often these options are found to be "unattractive or unprofitable, a problem exacerbated by the country's difficult economic situation" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2006, p. 11). PSCs can offer employment opportunities for these out of work military and police, and as the sector continues to expand, more and more jobs are becoming available. This further contributes to both the safety and stability of the state, while also adding to its overall economic development.

The Challenge of Privatizing Security: PSCs Eroding the State and its Legitimacy

While private security companies can, in certain ways, mitigate conflicts of security and identity and support stability and growth within states, they can alternatively further add to the instability of the state and prevent the achievement of any long-term development. When looking deeper into the case of Sierra Leone it can be seen how the country greatly benefitted from the work of PSCs, but in the end it can be determined that there was no real sustainability or longevity reached once the companies left. As Christopher Kinsey points out in his analysis of the problems of private security, while the PSCs were "quite capable of supporting the Sierra Leone government to enable it to stay in power, once the company had left, the government was again at the mercy of the local military forces and the RUF, who did not take long to launch a coup" (Kinsey 2007, p. 594). PSCs essentially take over the roles of the states, perhaps acting to "prop up a weak government," but in doing so they "substitute [themselves] in place of the country's military force" (Kinsey 2007, p. 586). While this may at first contribute to the stabilization of the situation, it eventually causes

complications and states can become dependent on the companies and are unable to act on their own once they leave.

Privatization of security can further take away from the transparency and credibility of states. In an historical overview of PSCs, Kinsey notes they emerged in Britain after World War II mainly as a way of "safeguarding British interests in places where the government, for whatever reason, was unable to act" (Kinsey 2007, p.587). In the United States, this pattern continues, and the use of PSCs can be seen as "another implement in the toolbox, with which the government can promote its foreign policy" (Kinsey 2007, p. 596). The implementation of PSCs in this sense can therefore be seen as a rather devious strategy that "allows states to bypass normal political procedures or to perform politically sensitive operations while retaining deniability" (Berndtsson 2009, p. 73). As Deborah Avant explains:

"If leaders can choose to use private forces, they may have less incentive to mobilize the public behind foreign policy and may make security decisions through processes less open to public view, less subject to challenges from opposition parties, and less scrutinized by the press" (Avant 2006, p. 515).

When states have the ability to deny their involvement and actions they can consequently lose accountability and democratic recognition, as well as the trust of their citizens and other states.

Essentially, PSCs are private entities—businesses concerned with making profits and maintaining customers. In this way, they turn issues of security into market-minded strategies, treating security as a commodity and taking integrity away from the states who utilize them. Avant further illustrates how the use of the market allows "PSCs to shape or interpret policy, thus shifting influence over policy to actors who may have a commercial interest in action" (Avant 2006, p.511). To increase profits and business PSCs can strategize to create needs for their services. They can "generate demand and raise profits not only by identifying new threats and increasing risk perception, but also by individualizing threat perception and security provision in order to expand the number of potential customers" (Krahmann 2008, p. 390). By doing this they can produce threats, or as Ulrich Beck (2007) describes it, they can "stage" or manufacture risks that could possibly occur, constructing a necessity for their products. This can explain why, even while crime rates seem to have gone down in certain industrialized nations, "public and private threat perceptions and demand for private security in the US and Europe have increased" (Krahmann 2008, p. 391).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a delicate relationship between identity, security, and the state. Identity is not assumed, static, or constant. Identities do not stop at state borders and can have deep seeded histories and implications. The challenge with labeling identities carries over to security when determining who to secure from whom, how, and by what means. Private security companies and privatizing security can at first seem to offer solutions to maintaining safety and stability when a state is no longer able to do so. However, the interference of PSCs in state functions ultimately can hinder the development and legitimacy of a state and cause further insecurities within. Yet the presence of PSCs around the globe remains strong. In 2009, the world's largest PSC, Group4Securicor, operated "in 115 countries, employ[ed] over 530,000 people, and rank[ed] as one of the London Stock Exchange's 100 largest corporations by capitalization" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009, p. 2). The legal status and legitimacy of PSCs, however, is rather ambiguous and their overall intentions and strategies should be questioned. Clearly, further research into their authority and impacts, specifically on developing nations, should be carried out.

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