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ARTICLE

Private security and military contractors: A troubling oversight

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Abstract

Though private military and security companies (PMSCs) have been addressed extensively in the literature, little research has been done on the contractors themselves, leaving us in the dark as to who these individuals are. In this article, we focus on the critical case of the United States armed services and argue that two broad developments have been converging that both point to the need for new, microlevel sociological research on the people who are involved in the global PMSC industry. To this end, we first draw from an extensive political science literature to illustrate the rise of the PMSCs and concomitant evolution of the security sector, while noting a new trend that points to the need for moving from the macrosocial to the microsocial level of inquiry. Second, we indicate the challenges contractors pose to the sociological paradigm of military professionalism: These suggest a need to move from the mesosocial to the microsocial level of inquiry. We conclude by reviewing the existing research on the demographics of the sector and then indicating the troubling gaps in our current understanding of this critical sector of the national security apparatus.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Private security and military contractors—who account for more than half of the boots on the ground in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and are part of a billion-dollar industry—have become major actors in contemporary international politics. Though private military and security companies (PMSCs) have received extensive scholarly attention, few studies have focused on the contractors themselves, leaving us in the dark as to who these individuals are. One reason for this limited research is a lack of data. Governmental agencies do not make data available, and given the national security sensitivities involved and the challenges of reaching the population, data are difficult to collect. As a result, we know very little about who in the private sector is fighting our wars.

The lack of data and research on PMSCs is problematic for several reasons. First, in the light of widespread criticism of using “modern mercenaries” (Heinecken, 2013)¹ and the fear of a breach in the sanctity of the “monopoly on violence” rule (Krahmann, 2013; Sheehy, Maogoto, & Newell, 2009; Verkuil, 2007), social scientists are today in the uncomfortable position of warning against a population about whom we know almost nothing. Second, the increasing reliance on contractors for national security issues raises questions about their efficacy and skills. If we knew more

about their education, health, and former occupations, for example, we would be in a much better position to anticipate whether hiring contractors is likely to benefit the public interest in the long term—or not. Last, given they are providing national security services, serving both society and state, it would behoove us to better understand their work and social conditions. Moreover, we need to know if their work conditions are regulated and if there are unintended consequences of this work on their later career attainment and personal health.

In this article, we point to the need for new, microlevel sociological research on the people who are involved in the global PMSC industry. We first draw from the extensive political science literature to illustrate the rise of the PMSCs and concomitant evolution of the security sector, and we point to the need to move from the macrosocial to the microsocal level of inquiry. Second, we indicate the challenges contractors pose to the sociological paradigm of military professionalism: These suggest a need to move from the mesosocial to the microsocal level of inquiry. We conclude by reviewing the existing research on the demographics of the sector and then indicating the troubling gaps in our current understanding of this critical sector of the national security apparatus. Throughout our review, we focus primarily on the United States armed services, which is the focus of most existing scholarship and captures the lion's share of the global PMSC market.

2 | PRIVATIZED SOLDIERS IN A SECURITIZED WORLD

The end of the Cold War and the victory of liberalism brought with it the privatization of war. How this came about has been well documented by political scientists and journalists. While some argue that the privatization of security is part of a broader trend of globalization and of the weakening and restructuring of the power of states (Huber & Stephens, 2005; Mitchell, 2011), scholarship examining the reasons for its rise has been largely focused on policy-related factors and mechanisms. Responding to the public sensitivities to fallen soldiers (Avant & Sigelman, 2010), pressure from the defense industry that identified opportunities for profit (Singer, 2011), and an emerging cultural belief that privatization can lead to better and more efficient security (e.g., Avant, 2004), American policy makers in the 1990s opened the door for private companies to step in. Contractors' achievements in Bosnia in 1995, where they operated mostly as consultants, and later with the staggering success of the South African Executive Outcomes in Sierra Leone in 1995 with the swift ending of the Revolutionary United Front reign of terror (Avant, 2004; Singer, 2007, 2011), signaled a new trend in privatizing warfare. However, the wars of the new millennium, most notably the Iraq and Afghanistan war, were the contractors' principle show of force. In charge of intelligence, logistics, maintenance, translation, communication, and static and patrol security missions (Elsea, Schwartz, & Nakamura, 2008; Schwartz, 2010), all roles traditionally missioned by professional soldiers, the private military sector was not an essential part within the war effort—it was the war effort. This trend was mimicked and adjusted by other countries as well, with the Israeli privatization of checkpoint missions in the West Bank (Havkin, 2011), Russian reliance on contractors in the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts (Grove, 2015; Rogin, 2014), Nigerian war against Boko Haram (Smith, 2015), Indonesian border security (Sciascia, 2013), and China's increasing security footprint in Africa (Erickson & Collins, 2012). Without noticing it, contractors became the weapon of choice across the globe.

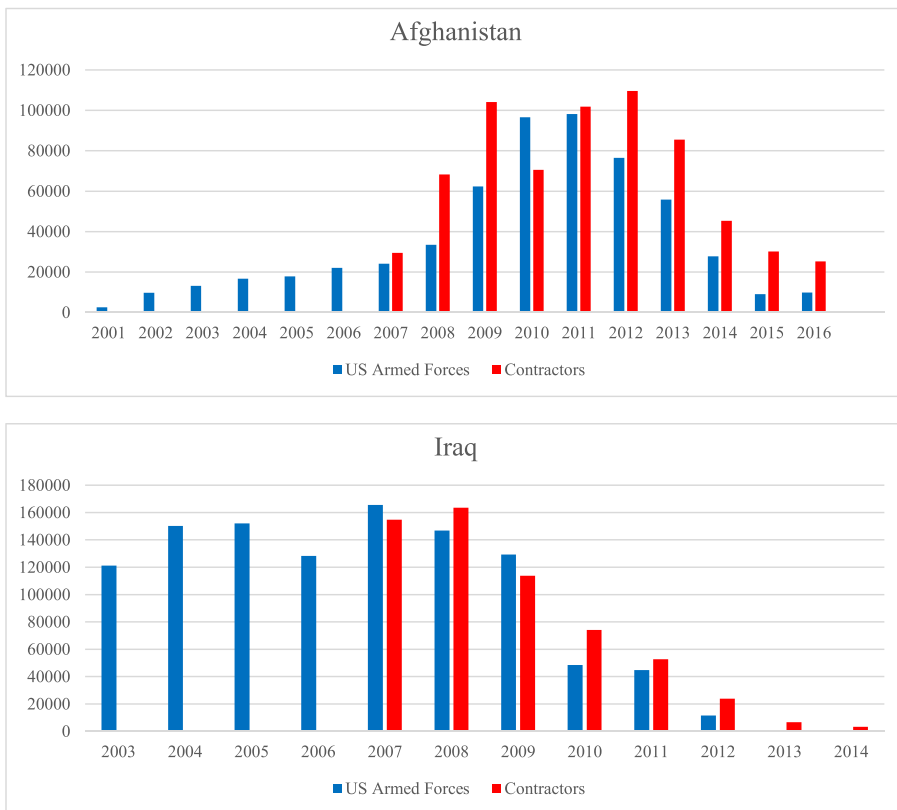
As war has privatized, military affairs have grown increasingly isolated from other areas of social life (Feaver & Kohn, 2001; Rahbek-Clemmensen et al., 2012). But while the public's direct encounters with war and military affairs have consistently shrunk over the past several decades, the role of security in social life has grown astoundingly. International relations scholars describe this expansion of security as "securitization," defined as "the social processes by which groups of people construct something as a threat" (Buzan & Hansen, 2009, p. 36; see also Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998).² In these terms, concerns once positioned firmly within the political arena (subject to debate and requiring normal public policy interventions) are increasingly moved to the security arena (justifying emergency measures).

The rise of securitization is widely documented. In the United States, a cascade of securitization rhetoric followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with the perception of threat reflected in everything from dramatically

heightened airport security to waves of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim violence (e.g., Saeed, 2016). For many years, the securitization literature remained resolutely at this macrosocial level of analysis, theorizing a broad historical trend within which the rise of PMSCs was a minor, discordant note. Recently, however, a second wave of scholars has stressed the processual character of securitization (e.g., Balzacq, 2010; Stritzel, 2007), observing the securitization of migrants (Huysman, 2000), of economic policies (Higgott, 2004), and of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Elbe, 2006). Viewing securitization in terms of the processes whereby security is enacted on the ground, rather than its circulation in the public sphere, demands much closer attention to the agencies that enact security policies and points directly to the understudied PMSC industry.

From a securitization perspective, the privatization of war is part of a broader social process that predicts not only the transfer of traditional public sector work to private sector actors but also a “mission creep” that will spread the logic of security (and particularly privatized security) ever deeper into the lives of states, not just at the level of political rhetoric but also at the level of boots on the ground. Indeed, this is precisely what we have seen in America's most recent wars.

The scope of the privatizing of American military operations is evident in Figure 1. There, we see that since 2008, contractors surpassed uniformed service members both in Afghanistan and Iraq. Moreover, in Iraq, it was the contractors that maintained the U.S. foothold after the American evacuation. This trend is evident in expenses as well. The Department of Defense contract obligations in Iraq and Afghanistan during the period of 2007–2014 reached \$215 billion (Peters, Schwartz, & Kapp, 2015). In 2014 alone, American taxpayers spent \$12.5 billion on contractors



* Compiled from the Private Security Monitor at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security & Diplomacy at the University of Denver.

FIGURE 1 U.S. Forces and Contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001–2016

in those two theaters, a little more than they spent on the entire Department of Labor (Office of Management and Budget, 2014).

Private companies did not supply only privatized soldiers but also provided an array of war-related services (Dunigan, 2012). In contradiction to common assumptions and media representations of the industry, especially in the light of the image of contractors as mercenaries, contractors are rarely used for combat missions. For example, in Iraq, most of the contractor personnel were employed in base support (65.3%) with only 12.2% used for security (Schwartz, 2010). Nonetheless, all services they provide, benign as they may appear (cooking, maintenance, and transportation), are functions once executed by military personnel and include substantial risk in comparison to parallel occupations in the civilian market.

There is a broader context to consider as well. The separation between “supporting war” and “fighting war” blurred in the Crimea Annexation (Rogin, 2014), Syrian Civil War (Grove, 2015), and the Yemen Civil War with contractors taking an active role in combat (Al-Junaid, 2014; Tiefer, 2015). With UN debates on using private security companies for peacekeeping missions (Brooks, 2000; Østensen, 2013; Spearin, 2011) and suggestions of leaders in the industry to fight ISIL in Syria and Iraq as substitute for sending the troops (Drennan, 2014), the role of PMSC in foreign policy has never been so great as it is today.

A RAND report on the Department of Defense's own nonuniformed support staff, the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce (CEW), compared its functions with private security contractors (PSCs) and private military contractors (PMCs; Dunigan, 2012). The report shows that while PSC's functions are unique and focus on forms of security, PMCs provide more technical skills and specializations (Table 1). It also indicates that there are some parallels between the PMCs and CEWs in terms of services provided.

As military functions are privatized, we might hope for gains in efficiency or at least a decrease in redundancy. By contrast, what the theory of securitization predicts and what these data suggest is that the privatization of war may be unfolding alongside the securitization of what were once military-dominated areas of work. This leaves them outside the usual mechanisms of oversight and political accountability, while also removing them from the professional purview of uniformed soldiers. It is a troubling development.

TABLE 1 A comparison of U.S. Civilian Expeditionary Workforce (CEW) roles and private military contractors (PMCs) and private security contractors (PSCs)

Roles of PSC and PMC personnel	Roles of CEW personnel
PSCs: Security	Security administration
Static site security	Contracting
Convoy security	Public affairs
Personal security detail	Foreign affairs
PMCs: Logistical support	General attorney
Weapon support and upkeep	Transportation specialists
Transportation specialists	
Communication system maintenance	Logistics management
Supply transport	Human resources assistance
Reconstruction workers	IT management
Language specialists/translators	Language specialists
Intelligence	Intelligence
Interrogators	Financial administration
PMCs: Base operations support	AfPak Hands
Engineers, builders	Civil engineers
Cooking, cleaning	

Note. Shading indicates potentially overlapping positions.

*From Dunigan (2012, p. 4).

3 | WARS WITHOUT PROFESSIONALS?

If PMSCs exemplify new ways to organize violence, they nevertheless partly inhabit a role that has been rigorously analyzed by sociologists for decades—the role of the military professional. The theory of military professionalism describes a relatively closed, relatively autonomous occupational group, which succeeds in monopolizing the legitimate violence of the state as it is projected abroad. Huntington (1957) framed its basic contours by describing the U.S. military's "managers of violence" as a professional group that monopolized a body of expert knowledge (how to fight war) and shared both an identity (described as a sense of corporateness) and a deep sense of responsibility to American society (returned to them in the form of trust).

Huntington's theory was based on limited empirical data and reflected the anxieties of his day, leading him to place an exceptional degree of faith in the moral integrity of battle-hardened officers. To correct these deficiencies, the model was modified and empirically tested by Janowitz (1960), who concluded that military professionals are also a political interest group. In a widely noted intervention, Moskos (1977) highlighted the threat to military professionalism posed by occupationalism, but the paradigm has endured (e.g., King, 2013; Matthews, 2002; Sarkesian, 1981). Janowitz (1960) and Moskos (1977) provide in this sense complementary sociological correctives to Huntington's (1957) idealized vision of the military profession, and together, they bequeathed to military sociology a more pragmatic notion of the military as an occupational field guided by an officer corps that loudly proclaimed its commitment to American society while also capable of pursuing interests of its own that were not always consonant with that commitment.

Despite its enduring value as a scholarly construct, American military professionalism as a lived experience is today very much in question. All three dimensions of professionalism embraced by both Huntington (1957) and Janowitz (1960), namely, expertise, corporateness, and responsibility, are today being challenged in the American context (for a summary of this critical literature, see Crosbie & Kleykamp, 2017). The expert knowledge produced through the Professional Military Education system, for example, has received withering critiques (e.g., Pierce, 2010; Johnson-Freese, 2013). The corporateness or collective identity of military professionals has also been called into question, with a deep disjoint between leaders' repeated demands that military professionals remain strictly apolitical (e.g., Mullen, 2008) contrasting with the increasingly complex and challenging political arena in which military professionals act (Babcock-Lumish, 2013; Brooks, 2008; Crosbie & Kleykamp, 2017; Meilinger, 2010; Strong, 2005). Finally, a number of scholars have challenged the rigor and consistency with which the military profession abides by its ethic of responsibility in the face of increasing operational and political complexities (Mattox, 2013; Milburn, 2010; Snider, Oh, & Toner, 2009; Ulrich & Cook, 2006; Wolfendale, 2009). Accordingly, our understanding of the military profession is today an imperfect one, made all the more complicated by the dramatic arrival of private military organizations employed by the state on the battlefield.

All of this aside, the most basic question about military professionalism remains contested: Who should be counted as a military professional? Are military professionals only the uniformed officers who manage violence, as Huntington (1957) thought, or who partook in the political agency of the services, as Janowitz (1960) thought? No one seems to agree (Willeford, 2014). Snider and Watkins (2002) argue that there are three distinct American military professions. Segal and De Angelis (2009) argue for the inclusion of some NCOs, reservists, and civilians.

Despite these indicators of a problem in how military professionalism is actually manifested and understood in the American context, the American Department of Defense is deeply wedded to the concept of professionalism and has recently reasserted the concept as critical to the organization's future. Leaders claim that the military must remain professional (Dempsey, 2012; Pierce, 2010). The Secretary of Defense has created a new uniformed advisory position dedicated to professionalism issues (Garamone, 2014). New organizational units focused on professionalism now proliferate across the services, with new doctrine based on rigorous research recently promulgated throughout the Army (Department of the Army, 2015). And so, while scholars across disciplines discover new problems facing the military as a profession, the military's official solution is more and better professionalism.

What does this strategic investment in professionalism suggest for the convergence of public and private military occupational groups? Are contractors now military professionals? This latter question has been asked (Schaub &

Franke, 2009–2010) but not yet conclusively answered. What is clear is that if we are to define a military professionalism for the post-War on Terror era, it must account for the degree to which military expertise, responsibility, and corporateness are manifested in the private sector, not simply among those in uniform employed by the state (Kelty & Bierman, 2013; Schaub & Franke, 2009–2010). These are not idle questions. If the critical sociological category of military professional is indeed opening up to include the private sector, then we can anticipate dramatic and potentially very negative effects on the health and well-being of the state.

Why should political sociologists worry about private contractors? A number of points of concern have already been raised. Avant (2002) has highlighted the privatization of military training, and others underscored the transformation from mercenaries to contractors (Avant, 2004; Mandel, 2001; O'Brien, 2000), with more comprehensive descriptions of this trend came later with works by Avant (2005), Chesterman and Lehnardt (2007), and Singer (2011). From this empirical baseline, a number of critiques have emerged, with scholars emphasizing the unregulated nature of this new form of engagement and its potentially hazardous implications. Already in their initial reviews of the field, Smith (2002) and Avant (2004) raised concerns about the challenge to the traditional state monopoly on violence and the nonexistent regulatory means to face it. Upholding these concerns, a comparative-historical examination identified a correlation between mercenary and contractor intervention in civil war and its severity (Petersohn, 2014). The fear is that states hire contractors to do work that is too dirty or too dangerous for their own uniformed agents, thereby creating a new class of quasi-professional warrior incentivized by money and operating with few or no legal constraints.

Unregulated contractors pose one sort of danger to people living in war zones, but they also pose a different sort of danger on the home front. The issue of surrendering the thing that defines the state as a state—its monopoly on collective violence—has received particular attention by critics. At the forefront of this critique were those who described privatization of force as “outsourcing sovereignty” (Verkuil, 2007) or warned against its destabilizing consequences with the development of real or fictitious demand for the market of force (Leander, 2005). This critique was echoed in several studies. McFate (2008) illustrated the dominant role of DynCorps International in the buildup of Liberia's armed forces. McCoy (2010) emphasized the reductions in the possibility for effective civilian control of outsourced militaries. Avant and De Nevers (2011) warned against the possibility of PMSCs used to pursue agendas that do not have the support of American, international, or local publics. This fear was resonated in Taussig-Rubbo's (2013) study of the outsourcing of sacrifice, showing that contractors' casualties are not reported and represent a lower political risk for war making. Heineken (2013) assessed that the privatization of war trend erodes the intellectual and moral hegemony of the armed forces as providers of public security. Finally, in his study on the attempt of a Czech PSC—Agency of the White Lion—to perform a hostile takeover on an existing minor political party in the Czech Republic, Bureš (2014) unearthed the potential dangers of the business–firm–party unholy trinity to state sovereignty.

The examination of these concerns at the legal level has stressed the complexities of this new trend. Several scholars reviewed the PMSCs and their employers' responsibilities under international and humanitarian law, highlighting regulatory gaps. It seems that though the law does address the possibility of contracting soldiers (De Nevers, 2009; Gillard, 2006), there are several regulatory gaps related to accountability that needed to be addressed. Largely, by using contractors, states may seek to reduce their exposure to international responsibility (Hoppe, 2008). This was highlighted in studies on the criminal liability of contractors (Finkelman, 2008; Price, 2014; Ryngaert, 2008) and the transparency related work on using these companies and on their actions (Avant & Sigelman, 2010; Østensen, 2013; Schooner, 2008).

In spite of these concerns, the trend of using PMSCs has increased (see Figure 1), driving scholars to examine pragmatic questions of efficacy rather than focusing on the moral and legal aspects of the trend. Identifying the contractors as a useful supplement for military action (Bruneau, 2011; Iris, 2009; Lovewine, 2011; Petersohn, 2013), scholars now recognize that PMSCs are used as an additional option in the state's military/political toolkit. Moreover, building on the successful experience of contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, several scholars suggested the privatization of peacekeeping forces as an effective solution for the international community's inability to overcome military challenges (Brooks, 2000; Østensen, 2013; Smith, 2002). Who, then, will be the military professionals of the next generation? Will they be uniformed agents of the state, long socialized in maintaining good relations with government and

civil society? Will they instead have no greater motivation to serve and to act responsibly than their own self-interest? Answering these questions will require a much richer understanding of the people involved.

4 | WHO ARE THE CONTRACTORS?

In the first and second sections, we argued that both the political science literature on contractors, which has focused on the macrosocial scale, and the sociological literature on the military, which has focused on the mesosocial level, equally point to a need to revisit the microsocial scale of individuals being contracted by the state to do work formerly monopolized by agents of the state. In other words, both fields are converging on the same question: Who are the contractors? In this third section, we survey the limited literature answering this question and then conclude by making several explicit calls for future research priorities.

The limited research that exists challenges stereotypes about PMSCs. In contrast to the popular image of them as rabid mercenary “dogs of war,” surveys of this population indicated that they are driven by altruistic and patriotic notions (e.g., Pattison, 2014). In a survey of 200 individuals who have previously worked for PMSCs and now work in law enforcement, Franke and Von Boemcken (2011, p. 736) dispel the myth of “money-grabbing, gun-toting, thrill-seeking Rambo-type mercenaries” and provide instead a complicated portrait of a population more interested in peacekeeping than warring, while also viewing their work more in vocational than occupational terms.

Contracting military work has significant gender and ethno-racial implications. Even as military organizations move toward integrating women into combat roles, the contractor population remains disproportionately men (Eichler, 2015; Schulz & Yeung, 2008; Stachowitsch, 2013). Studies released by the Congressional Research Service also indicate that America's contractors are mostly non-Americans, especially in the service subsector (Schwartz, 2010, 2011). Groundbreaking ethnographic research by Amanda Chisholm (2014a, 2014b, 2015) makes clear the inequality and racialized disparity encountered by one group of Gurkha security contractors. Kelty and Bierman (2013) find similar traces of inequity in their web-based survey of two logistics units deployed in combat zones. In her ethnography on Sierra Leonian contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, Christensen (2016) described exploitation, inequality, and poor work conditions that lead to strikes and protests. In comparison to soldiers, contractors' social benefits and healthcare coverage is worse (Cotton et al., 2010; Kelty & Bierman, 2013). Since they are exposed to the same health hazards as professional soldiers, they have increased chances to suffer from poor health (Feinstein & Botes, 2009; MacLean & Kleykamp, 2014; Roop, Niven, Calvin, Bader, & Zacher, 2007). They are particularly at risk of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Dunigan, Burns, Hawks, & Setodji, 2013).

Clearly, the rise of the contractor-soldier has not skipped academic inquiry entirely, and multiple studies have addressed this emerging industry and its implications. However, with the exception of the previously mentioned studies, scholarship has remained for the most part on the macrosocial level, mapping the phenomenon as a whole rather than explaining who the contractors are and what do they do. Moreover, the separation between PMC, PSC, and CEW remains unclear. This oversight in the political science literature is partly supplemented by the much smaller military sociology literature. With its focus on the military as organization and profession, military sociology can give us a better sense of what contracting work looks like and why it is significant, and yet this too has failed to account for whether or not contractors should be counted as members of the profession. In spite of their increasing role in policy implementation and despite the myriad concerns raised about their involvement, we know almost nothing about contractors as a population.

Correcting this oversight will require a sensitization to not only the broader trends noted above in global securitization and in military professionalism but also will ideally bring researchers into the intellectual and professional lifeworlds of the contractors themselves. This should include both quantitative and qualitative research, illuminating basic demographic information while also providing the sort of information we need to understand whether the contractor population is fundamentally a veteran population motivated by much the same concerns as the military population or is instead something different. PMSCs and the individual contractors they employ are social and political actors of global significance. It is time to get to know them.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ While Singer (2011) draws a sharp distinction between PMSCs and mercenaries, the fear lingers that “corporate warriors” (PMSCs) pose equal if not greater threats to the social and political order as earlier generations of mercenaries.
- ² Buzan's *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Buzan, 2007 [1991]) can be credited with setting the agenda for securitization research, although Buzan himself (Buzan, 2007, p. 3) credits Ole Waever with the coining of the term.

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