

The Impact of Security Privatization on Humanitarian Action

By Jean S. Renouf

INTRODUCTION :

Among the various challenges that humanitarian organizations face, one is related to the emergence of new actors in armed conflicts : the private security companies (PSCs). Although their definition remains debated¹, a private security company can be defined as a company providing services aimed at having a strategic impact on the safety of people or goods against remuneration. These services range from logistical support, context analysis, crisis and risk management to physical protection of people and / or goods, training of armed forces, and even operational command and combat. Among the well known private security companies are Aegis, ArmorGroup, Blackwater, Control Risks Group, DynCorp, Erinys, Hart, MPRI, Vinnel Corporation, etc.

TEXT :

This industrialization of a military backed security has dramatically increased since the end of the cold war, but the zest for privatization has spread even further with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Subsequently, it is estimated that in 2005, the number of private security agents in Iraq rose up to 50.000 individuals (including 12.000 to 20.000 expatriates)². There is a range of reasons underlying this phenomenon, however three stand out as fundamentals to the analysis.

- Firstly, since various functions formerly reserved to soldiers have now been privatized, the US army is unable to carry out war without resorting to the help of private security companies.
- Secondly, since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the resulting reduction of personnel in the armies, a large number of former soldiers from different States entered the private security labour market.
- Lastly, since foreign contractors operating in Iraq and Afghanistan were unable to obtain protection from the Multinational forces, they were obliged to protect themselves by hiring private security companies. As a result, according to some, approximately 25% to 50% of the Iraqi reconstruction budget is actually used to finance private security expenditure³.

SUB-TITLE : SYMPTOM OF THE CONFLICT'S TRANSFORMATION :

Such privatization of the security sector is not surprising when considered in relation to the "new wars" as explained by Duffield, whereby the emergence of new forms of authority of trade and the regulation or deregulation of violence is done through the market⁴. While the post-Cold War international humanitarian interventions served a variety of purposes (from the provision of supplies and assistance to reconstruction, including of public security services, etc), private security companies are not alien to the reconstruction process; in fact, many are now playing an important role in state building activities across the globe.

¹ Neither the private security contractors nor the scholars agree on the definition.

² AFP, «America's Hired Guns: a Pot of Gold or Death», May 12, 2005, www.iht.com/articles/2005/05/11/news/private.php.

³ See the *Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction*, reports, http://www.sigir.mil/reports/QuarterlyReports/Jan06/pdf/Report_-_January_2006.pdf and *The Washington Times*, «Iraqi Construction Funds Go To Security», February 9, 2006, www.washtimes.com/national/20060209-124325-7786r.htm.

⁴ Duffield «Global Governance and the New Wars : the Merging of Development and Security», Zed Books, 2001, quoted in Kjell Bjork and Richard Jones, «Overcoming Dilemmas Created by the 21st Century Mercenaries : Conceptualising the use of private security companies in Iraq», *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 26, No 4-5, pp.777–796, 2005.

In addition, in the context of the global “long war”⁵ against terrorism coupled with global economic liberalisation, private securitization has significantly increased. Therefore, far from being limited to Afghanistan and Iraq, private security companies at one time or another have been present on every continent. Given the importance of their use in recent years, it is reasonable to predict that private security companies might be involved in all armed conflicts in the near future. The growing importance of these new actors raises many questions. Looking beyond the consequences of the privatization of security on the conduct of war⁶, this phenomenon has an undeniable impact on humanitarian action.

RELATIONS WITH THE HUMANITARIAN ACTORS :

So far no systematic study has been conducted in terms of analyzing the relationship between humanitarian actors and private security firms, however it seems that although limited, contractual relations develop between the two. As such, there are cases where private security firms were hired by NGO's and agencies of the United Nations for mines clearing operations, sites protection, security training, risks and crisis management, reviews of regulations and existing security procedures and even provision of armed guards. This tendency can be explained by a real or perceived increase of threat against humanitarian actors (related in particular to the erosion of their acceptance strategy effectiveness) and by the attraction of a potentially vast market for private security professionals. Furthermore, some lobbyists⁷ are firmly supporting the idea of privatizing the UN peacekeepers or some aspects of the peacekeeping operations. Oppositely, other humanitarian actors are totally opposed to any kind of exchange with private security firms mainly for ethical or moral reasons. Should we then look for an intermediary solution, where humanitarian organizations would bind themselves not to use private security companies when their services include the use of weapons?

SUB-TITLE : SECURITY DILEMMAS :

The decision to hire private security companies is up to each humanitarian organization. Nonetheless, decisions taken by some organizations will necessarily affect other organizations.

While failing to develop a local support network, some humanitarian organizations remain present in extremely dangerous environments mainly because they benefit from the services of private security firms for their physical protection. Thus, some NGOs working in Iraq (in particular North Americans) are, for more or less objective reasons, assimilated to the multinational forces by the local communities ; therefore, between leaving the country or remaining under the protection of private security firms, the latter is understandable. Within the scope of the debate between the “Dunantist” NGOs and the “Wilsonian” NGOs⁸, it would be interesting to see whether such decisions are direct consequences of different approaches and management of security and, consequently, to see whether it contributes to further increase the gap between European NGO's and American NGO's.

However, by focusing on their own security, humanitarian organizations tend to forget that the debate should not only focus on their physical protection, but also on how to mitigate the absence of ‘human security’⁹ of the beneficiaries ; their security should not be seen as an end itself, but as a mean to an end. When an organization entrusts the management of its safety to an external professional it can potentially lead to a decrease of its own expertise while increasing the dependence with respect to external actors¹⁰. One can then imagine that private security in search of commercial interests, but also for professional reasons, put the emphasis on the security of their clients rather than on the pursuit of

⁵ Quadrennial Defence Review, <http://www.defenselink.mil/qdr/>.

⁶ Several questions are indeed asked : does the privatization lead to more adventurous foreign policies ? to war conducted through proxies? Does it favour the spread of arms ? By multiplying the number of armed actors in the field, isn't conflict resolution / regulation rendered more difficult ? etc...

⁷ See www.ipoaonline.org, the International Peace Operations Association's website.

⁸ According to Abby Stoddard, the NGOs can be classified in different typologies ; one of them makes a difference between the religious NGOs, (such as Catholic Relief Service, World Vision), the “Dunantist” NGOs (such as Save the Children – UK, Oxfam or *Médecins Sans Frontières*) and the “Wilsonian” NGOs (such as CARE – US, and the majority of the north-American NGOs), « Humanitarian action and the ‘global war on terror’ : a review of trends and issues », Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group report 14, July 2003.

⁹ The recent concept of *Human security* aims at protecting the individuals from any political violence, whether its derived from threats to the physical integrity, or threats originating from poverty, starvation, socio-economic inequalities or natural disasters. See <http://www.humansecurityreport.info/>.

¹⁰ Peter W. Singer, *Corporate Warriors – The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2003, p 78.

humanitarian objectives; since it is safer to stay at home than to negotiate with the local warlords, this in turn contributes to the development of a comprehension of the context limited to the compound¹¹.

Additionally, according to the classic dilemma of security¹², the decision of some NGOs to use private security companies to ensure their security has a double impact on those organizations that did not choose such an option. On the one hand, the latter group can feel less protected in comparison to those that hired private agents, and on the other hand, armed groups might be more inclined to attack those with less security forces to protect them.

SUB-TITLE : THE DONORS' ROLE :

It is appropriate under such condition to follow with attention the policies of the donors with respect to the safety of their humanitarian partners. In fact, the donors have a moral obligation, among others, to make sure that the organizations that they fund take all the necessary precautions while implementing their programs. One can consequently imagine that, in some circumstances, the donor might impose NGOs to hire private security companies in order to ensure their security and the security of the sites where they operate.

Meanwhile, the American government recently put its aid agency (USAID) not only at the disposal of its foreign policy but also of its defence policy¹³. At the beginning of the military operations in Iraq, it also attempted to coordinate humanitarian activities under the tutelage of the Joint NGO Emergency Preparedness Initiative¹⁴. Later, they successfully outsourced to a private security company the coordination of the PSCs in Iraq¹⁵. Therefore, it is not unthinkable that in the near future USAID could ask its partners (including private security companies as well as humanitarian actors) to cooperate and coordinate the management of their security under the tutelage of an organization managed by a private entity that could be a private security firm. In this instance, what will be the position of NGOs and UN agencies funded by the US government?

Already, in a context where humanitarian organizations militarize themselves and the soldiers privatize themselves¹⁶, where private security companies claim to carry out humanitarian interventions to mitigate the absence of NGOs in the field¹⁷ and confusion prevails. One can imagine the difficulties that local populations face to differentiate between foreign armies, foreign contractors, foreign humanitarian organizations and ubiquitous international private security companies that provide services for each of these actors! One questions, in this scenario, whether the use of private security companies by humanitarian aid groups contribute to further confusion or, on the contrary, whether it preserves the independence of humanitarian action¹⁸.

¹¹ Or *compound mentality* : A tendency of aid agencies, and especially their international staff, to discuss and analyse their environment among themselves with little reference to or interaction with non-aid actors in that environment.

¹² According to this dilemma, the improvement of the protection of a unity (whether at state, intra-state or individual level), creates always a feeling of insecurity among its neighbour ; consequently, those last will also look to improve their protection and therefore contribute to an escalation of the tension.

¹³ «This reorganization [of USAID] will ensure that foreign assistance is used as effectively as possible to meet our broad foreign policy objectives», <http://www.usaid.gov/press/factsheets/2006/fs060119.html>. Steve Peacock, «US: Washington blurs lines between Pentagon and USAID», NACLA report on the Americas, Vol. 39 No.4, Jan. Feb. 2006, http://www.nacla.org/art_display.php?art=2626.

¹⁴ Without success in light of the resistance of the humanitarian actors willing to keep their independence ; those last then created the NGO Coordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI, www.ncciraq.org).

¹⁵ See among others, Tony Dawe, «Aegis links help reinforce security», The Times, 25 November 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,630-1889621,00.html>.

¹⁶ See among others, Sami Makki, *Militarisation de l'humanitaire, privatisation du militaire*, Cirpès, Paris, 2004 and from the same author « Militarisation de l'humanitaire : les enjeux de l'intégration civilo-militaire dans l'appareil de sécurité nationale américain », *Humanitaire*, n°8, automne 2003, pp. 88-107. Roland Marchal, *Cultures et conflits*, n°11, « La militarisation de l'humanitaire, l'exemple somalien », <http://www.conflits.org/document429.html>.

¹⁷ Interview with a senior representative of an important private security company working in Iraq, 13 february 2006.

¹⁸ The services offered by the PSCs are not always visible to persons external to the humanitarian organization. It can for example be limited to an on-line subscription to strategic analysis.

One sure thing: private security companies are available and allow various actors, and in particular private companies, to establish in areas where their presence would have, otherwise, been improbable¹⁹.

SUB-TITLE : REQUEST FOR CLARIFICATION :

Hence, the privatization of security has, in all aspects, an impact on humanitarian action. Even in cases where NGOs do not sign contracts with private security firms, they must nevertheless develop tools for understanding this phenomenon. Just like the humanitarian sector, the private security sector is diverse. Some private security firms are well aware of the enormous potential that the humanitarian sector offers and work on their public image by adopting ethical conduct and by excluding armed protection from their services. Others on the contrary, are more inclined to financial gain and willing to carry out covert operations. In either case, NGOs must plead for more transparency, by requesting in particular that the donors and the UN agencies develop clear strategies with respect to the private security firms as well as make public their contracts with the latter group.

Von Tangen mentions a study conducted by International Alert²⁰ that highlights the risks involved in cases where humanitarian organizations hire private security firms *without carrying out preliminary research on the company* in question. In order to avoid these risks, Von Brabant proposes useful recommendations²¹ – but sometimes difficult to implement – for humanitarian organization eager to hire a private security firm. In all cases, this decision must be the outcome of a strategy rather than of a context where emergency takes precedence over any other consideration.

As an integral part of the civil society, NGOs have a significant role to play in this process of regulation.

Because the handling of weapons or the collection of strategic information in war zones (where often the rule of law is *de facto* non-existent) are sensitive activities, the private security firms must be accountable for their actions.

However and despite recent improvements, a legal blur surrounds their statutes and activities. Briefly, the UN conventions prohibiting the use of mercenaries are hardly applicable, national legislations can be eluded and the contractual obligations between the private security firms and their customers are not sufficient. As Singer (one of the most quoted researchers on the subject) underlines, “a globalized industry demands a globalized response”²². As a result, he proposes that a group of international experts (which would include all the parties involved: private security contractors, researchers, government representatives and NGOs) elaborate a comprehensive database on the PSCs and tools of regulation and evaluation under the mandate of the UN. The same group shall also monitor the respect of the code of conduct, lead audits and sanction private security companies and their leaders in case their activities contradict the principles of international law. This group could be the basis for a new organization that would have the capacity to stop payments and hold accountable individuals and leaders in case of violation of the law. Utopia? This solution is nonetheless taken seriously by experts and professionals in the field.

CONCLUSION :

By “opening the debate”²³, in regards to the relationship between private security companies and humanitarian actors, International Alert suggests several options to be explored: among others, to implement measures aimed at controlling and monitoring the respect of the PSCs’ code of conduct, to develop a database and share information that would allow NGOs to know the behaviour and reputation of the private security companies and to continue researches on the subject. However so far, no systematic study has established relevant facts, successes and failures, and suggested solutions after a thorough analysis of the relationship between private security companies and

¹⁹ However, by allowing certain companies to engage in activities traditionally devolved to humanitarian organizations, the PSCs will contribute to the merchandizing of the humanitarian sphere.

²⁰ Von Tangen, Humanitarian Review, Autumn 2004, « Private Security Should Not Be a Grubby Little Secret », <http://www.humanitarian-review.org/upload/pdf/VonTangenPageEnglishFinal.pdf>.

²¹ Von Brabant, “Operational Security Management in Violent Environments: A Field Manual for Aid Agencies”, *Good Practice Review*, ODI, August 2000.

²² Peter W. Singer, *ibid*, p 241.

²³ International Alert, « Humanitarian Action and Private Security Companies – Opening the Debate », May 2002, <http://www.international-alert.org/publications/88.php>.

humanitarian actors. Since the privatization of security has an unquestionable impact on humanitarian action, this research should be conducted without further delays.
A question remains: are humanitarian organizations ready to continue the debate?

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