

# Countering terrorism in the shadows: The role of private security and military companies

Iveta Hlouchova

ihlouchova@faculty.unyp.cz

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9077-4100>

School of International Relations, University of New York in Prague, Londynska 41, 10200 Prague, Czech Republic

## Abstract

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*The article identifies the main features of the PSMCs' involvement in counterterrorism operations and outlines what their future involvement might look like with its implications for international peace and security. The main methods used to gather data and to draw inferences are a content analysis of relevant primary and secondary sources, and a discourse analysis, used as a method of examining the prevailing discourse surrounding the activities of PSMCs, seeking to understand the level of transparency, accountability and attributability of these actors. So far, the PSMCs' potential for counterterrorism has not been fully exploited. There are many challenges surrounding the existence and operations of PSMCs, mainly lack of transparency and accountability, the continuous significance of the plausible deniability and political expediency PSMCs provide to nation governments, and an insufficient and inadequate international regulatory and control framework with no sanction or enforcement mechanisms. Most recently, the tendency to re-legitimise PSMCs' activities can be identified. There will most probably be an expansion of PSMCs' activities in the near future, as climate change consolidates security as a commodity, not a right. Therefore, there is a renewed urgency for adequate and effective international regulatory and control mechanisms on their activities on the international level.*

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## Keywords:

security, regulations, privatisation, counterterrorism, proxy

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## Introduction

PSMCs have become an important instrument of individual government efforts in pursuit of national security, by what has been widely referred to as “filling the gaps” in the state security forces’ capabilities to tackle security threats to their domestic countries. Counterterrorism proved no different, as actors involved in it often sought the services of the private security market to provide capabilities that they lacked themselves. What has been widely considered a private security bonanza is the post-9/11 security landscape, chiefly but not only, the global war on terrorism (GWOT). The hastened, wide-ranging response to the those unprecedented terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 opened up room for PSMCs to flourish and greatly profit in a legal vacuum, mostly out of the public sight, providing governments engaged in the war on terrorism with the convenient political expediency and plausible deniability they needed to engage in ‘unconventional’ practices to counter the operations and, ultimately, eliminate the existence of terrorist organisations. It was not only the United States, but also countries like the United Kingdom and Israel that outsourced significant portions of their (counterterrorism, but not only) national security systems to private entities. The most recent tendency of the US/Western administrations to “end endless wars” and to adopt a light-footprint strategy<sup>1</sup> in conflict zones and fight against terrorism around the world indicates that the private security market is once again on the rise.

The aim of this article is to explore the role of PSMCs in counterterrorism campaigns from the strategic perspective in the past, present and future security environments. By doing so, this article aims to make the case for increased attention to the long overlooked/ignored role of PSMCs as an extended hand of governments of individual nation states (and, by extension, international organisations). This will help governments, international organisations, and experts better understand and better prepare for the future security environment by articulating and implementing recommendations and policies that will be effective, rather than counterproductive in countering terrorism in the future, by leveraging the potential PSMCs have and minimising the negative consequences their presence and operations may cause in security formulation and realisation.

This article seeks to provide satisfactory answers to two main research questions:

1. What are the major features of the private security involvement in counterterrorism efforts?
2. What will the private security involvement in future counterterrorism efforts look like and mean for global peace and security?

Seeking adequate and sufficient data to formulate constructive answers to these two research questions is conducted by content analysis of relevant primary (official documents and reports of nation states’ governments or international organisations, contracts, if applicable...) and secondary sources (expert publications, books and articles, reports by investigative journalists, newspaper articles). All the information is subjected to cross-referring of its validity through other sources of data, in order to increase the overall triangulation of the data that constitutes the basis of this article and the main arguments presented in it. Furthermore, discourse analysis is used as a method of examining the prevailing discourse surrounding the activities of PSMCs, seeking to understand the level of transparency, accountability and attributability of these actors.

The first two parts of this article set the theoretical and conceptual framework of the research, first, by discussing the concept of counterterrorism (its definition, most com-

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1. *The light footprint approach aims to keep the costs of military engagements low, relying on precision strikes from U.S. aircraft and clandestine SOF ground units in support of local allies’ ground forces.*

mon practices) and, second, by addressing the theoretical underpinnings and major characteristics of the phenomenon of privatisation of security in order to better understand PSMCs as actors in international relations and security in their own right. The next section of the article explores the involvement of PSMCs in counterterrorism efforts in the past, with most of the attention placed on their involvement in GWOT (for reasons related to availability of credible and verifiable data). The following section examines the present state of the global private security market as related to counterterrorism. The last part of the article then contemplates what the future security environment and the PSMCs' involvement in it will probably look like and assesses the potential PSMCs have to contribute to counterterrorism efforts constructively. The concluding chapter then summarises the main arguments made in the article and offers recommendations for decision-makers on how to utilise PSMCs productively and effectively, and makes recommendations for future research on this topic.

## Counterterrorism practice

As is the case with terrorism, counterterrorism cannot be simply disentangled from other security challenges such as counterinsurgency or efforts aimed at countering transnational organised crime (anti-money-laundering activities, tackling human trafficking and addressing illegal arms trade). To evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency, let alone success, of a counterterrorism strategy is very tricky, and any efforts to do so have produced mixed and incomplete results. The main reason for this daunting track record is that at its core, terrorism is “ultimately a *tactic* used by individuals and groups who want to force political change by means of violence against non-combatants” (King, 2016, p. 253). There are cases of terrorism being used by criminal groups to achieve their apolitical objectives as well, particularly in order to intimidate members of a rival criminal group (such as the Mexican drug cartels that resort to planting explosives against their rivals). The extent to which individuals or groups resort to the use of terrorism (as a tactic) varies and, therefore, it has been widely recognised that counterterrorism policies and strategies can no longer be aimed at eliminating only certain specific capabilities of those actors that engage in terrorist activity, nor should counterterrorism approaches remain compartmentalised in those limited policy areas. On the contrary, there has been an increased emphasis on approaching counterterrorism as a sum of efforts coordinated across a wide array of policy sectors and domains (Crelinsten, 2009; Van Dongen, 2010). A counterterrorism strategy is “a coherent plan to use the instruments of national power to neutralize terrorists, their organisations and their networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to instil fear and to coerce a specific government or its citizens to react in accordance with their [the terrorists'] goals” (Stigall, Miller and Donnatucci, 2019, pp. 6–7).

Given the delicate complexities of the terrorist threat, counterterrorism strategies, especially the hastened response to the 9/11 attack and, consequently, those counterterrorism policies enacted after 9/11, have often suffered from negative second- and third-wave consequences of the overreaction that usually follows after major high-profile terrorist attacks, particularly in the West. The 9/11 attacks heralded a new era of military interventions in foreign countries and surveillance powers and security protocols in domestic environments. The extensive focus on counterterrorism in the post-9/11 era, consequentially, presented increased challenges to democratic regimes, as the instruments employed with the primary aim of maintaining national security often collided with democratic principles of individual rights and freedoms, openness and transparency, accountability, attributability, legitimacy and legality, and public trust in government. Importantly, non-democratic regimes often engage in counterterrorism campaigns as well, as they, too, can be targeted by terrorist violence. Those tend to be more repressive (domestically and out-

wardly towards the diaspora) and focused on prevention (preventive repression) in their nature. In both democratic and non-democratic political systems, the terrorism label sometimes gets hijacked to an overstretch for political gains, when political representatives attempt to delegitimise opposition or critical voices by referring to them as “terrorists” in order to turn the public opinion in favour of those politicians and against those that oppose or criticise some aspect of their governance (or lack thereof).

Any counterterrorism strategy to be effective requires deliberate resourcing with tools that reflect the desirable comprehensive and the “whole-of-society” nature of counterterrorism efforts. Resources are applied through the use of these tools, traditionally referred to as “instruments of national power”<sup>2</sup>. Paul Shemella (2011, pp. 155–157) stresses the importance of expanding the concept of “instruments of national power” further to cover the full range of resources that are, given the complexity of the terrorist threat itself, much wider in scope and varied in qualitative terms, including intelligence, legislature, judiciary, law enforcement and civil society”. Each of these counterterrorism tools has its specific tasks and responsibilities as part of broader counterterrorism efforts; they share their designated functions across agencies and organisations.

What’s notably missing here is the inclusion of the private security sector. The reason for this could be that Shemella wrote his work in 2011 when the general attention and awareness of the PSMCs’ operations in the context of counterterrorism was minimal, even though some high-profile cases of PSMCs’ involvement in some of the theatres of GWOT had already been known back then. Still, to this day, the level of attention to the activities, and mainly the potential of the private security sector in countering the threat of terrorism, has not been as significant as it should be. Although the most recent national counterterrorism strategies of prominent nation states engaged in counterterrorism on the global scale feature the importance of private-public partnerships (P3), often with regard to the dominant position that the private sector holds in the fields of technology or critical infrastructure, any notions of or references to specific tasks, roles and responsibilities of PSMCs are notably absent.

## Understanding PSMCs as actors in international security

Provision of security in exchange for gaining (monetary) profit has always been presented in armed conflict. One might say that hiring outsiders to fight your battles is the second oldest profession in the world, as old as war itself. Profit-motivated private entities have been present/operating in every armed conflict throughout history on every continent. PSMCs are corporate actors that have been gaining an increasingly important role in the modern warfare. PSMCs’ existence and operations are tied to the post-Cold War security environment which was conducive to the rapid boom in privatisation and corporatisation of security. They are legitimate business entities that are legally registered, based on the art of entrepreneurship and built along business structures, corporate standards, principles and values. Firms operating on the private security market represent legal business entities that trade in professional services intricately linked to warfare. PSMCs are defined by trading in security goods and services that are either financed, delivered, or both, by an entity other than a government (Hloučhová, 2018, p. 47)<sup>3</sup>.

The customer/client base of PSMCs is wide and transnational. States/nation governments are the most common clients for PSMCs in the counterterrorism field, since governments outsource part of their monopoly over the legitimate use of force to non-state corporate entities. This, then, creates tension in the framework of regulation of the activities of PSMCs on the global level. The relations of PSMCs with state security structures and

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2. These, traditionally, include diplomacy, information, military, and economy (DIME) (Farlin, 2014).

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3. Even though in many cases, official as well as unofficial ties to government structures or government officials exist, often in a form of personal ties or a regular business relationship (Hloučhová, 2018, p. 53).

systems in general stretch from mutually supportive activities (cooperation) to mutually undermining roles and functions (competition, conflict). In certain situations, duplication of activities can be identified. Other important non-state actors in international relations who rely heavily on the goods and services provided by the private security sector involve non-governmental organisations, international organisations (UN, EU, NATO), or transnational corporations (Hloučková, 2018).

The portfolio of the security-related goods and services PSMCs offer up on the market is vast and extensive, ranging from guarding of military bases or provision of support logistics to the core military combat functions, including what was long considered a critical state function – intelligence collection and analysis. The character and scope of the portfolio of the private security services directly or indirectly reflect the main reasons behind the recent rapid increase in both the dynamics and importance of private security entities as key players in the global security environment – the floods of soldiers and weapons after post-Cold war downsizing in state armed forces, the decline of local state governance, of the local military response and outside intervention (see Singer, 2008).

For research purposes, this portfolio has been divided into a number of different categories and classifications by different experts. It is important to remember that such categories often represent ideal types. In reality, the lines are often blurred, as individual companies provide more than just one or two types of security-related goods or services and the contemporary battleground does not usually have clear frontlines. The basic dichotomy is the differentiation between private security companies (PSCs) and private military companies (PMCs). From one perspective, the term PSCs is broader and thereby superior to the term PMCs, as it is narrower in the spectrum of the goods and services they provide. PMCs are distinguishable by providing goods and services conventionally understood as ‘military-grade’, i.e. so-called higher security services (such as personal security detail, training, advising, assisting, surveillance, reconnaissance, intelligence gathering etc., usually in the context of armed conflict) (Singer, 2008, p. 48). The narrower conception of PSCs is then built on the assumption that PSCs provide less kinetic and more static security-related goods and services, including physical security (static guarding), logistical supplies support or consultancy in an armed conflict and in peacetime. Both these categories have quite a significant potential to contribute to sourcing of counterterrorism efforts (Singer, 2008).

Prominent expert, Peter W. Singer, distinguishes three main types of PSMCs by the type of services they provide – providers; consultants; and supporters (Singer, 2008, pp. 91–100). He uses the tip-of-the-spear analogy (i.e. its geographical and functional proximity to the front lines and also, potentially, their direct participation in hostilities) to demonstrate the basic attributes of each type. Although simplified and outdated, this typology still serves as a good starting point for understanding and researching the phenomenon of privatisation of security.

Another significant division of the spectrum of PSMCs’ services was developed by Hannah Tonkin. She recognises firms that provide offensive combat functions; military and security expertise; armed services (guarding); and military support (Tonkin, 2011, pp. 33–52). Where Singer focused on PMCs, Tonkin also included PSCs into her typology. Neither of the two primal typologies do, however, include some of the newer specialisations of the private security market, such as services specialising in hostage negotiations. Private companies with expertise in intelligence gathering and analysis cannot be easily fitted into these categories either<sup>4</sup>. These types of services produce additional controversies and challenges to the very existence and activities of PSMCs and their oversight, control and monitoring mechanisms and regulation (Tonkin, 2011).

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4. A good overview of the field of private intelligence is presented in Shorrock (2008).

There are other criteria we may consider for easier categorisation of the services offered on the private security market (Are the services they provide offensive or defensive in nature? Can they potentially be lethal? Do they provide active or passive support of defence capabilities of their customers? Are the companies legitimate in their business dealings?). Given the complex nature of the phenomenon of privatisation of security and the involvement of PSMCs in counterterrorism campaigns, it is best to focus on the nature and provisions of the specific contracts rather than the nature of the actors themselves in order to fully grasp the scope, character and complexities of this issue. Most of the counterterrorism-related contracts of private security entities, however, remain classified, citing their importance to the matters of national security.

Most of the controversies surrounding PSMCs in the contemporary security environment are predominantly linked to the apparent lack of their accountability, where decision-makers, security practitioners and the ordinary public still suffer from what the author of this article calls the Blackwater syndrome<sup>5</sup>. The pressure that started to manifest as the Blackwater syndrome led many politicians and corporate decision makers to leave the public arena and thus strengthen the potential of PSMCs to operate in politically sensitive security fields for a state government. PSMCs provide political representatives of states with the plausible deniability they seek to claim a light footprint strategy in politically sensitive conflict zones (Ibid). Recently, there have been attempts to legitimise PSMCs' involvement in conflicts, in which counterterrorism campaigns dominate the battlefield, by leveraging the war fatigue in Western countries to portray PSMCs as a viable and cost-effective alternative to long-term, large scale military engagements. The contemporary global political climate may be more conducive to yet another increase in the involvement of PSMCs in armed conflicts (including counterterrorism missions) around the world, all aspects of the scope, width, scale, intensity and somewhat new overtness of their activities.

There are a number of challenges that surround the existence and operations of PSMCs, particularly when hired by governments. The most consequential ones, for democratic and autocratic regimes alike, is the political expediency that contracting the services of private entities entails. States tend to outsource the security-related goods and services they either don't have the capacity to deliver<sup>6</sup>, or (more often) are not willing to conduct themselves, for the potential political costs it could mean. The possibility to use PSMCs instead of regular state armed forces gives governments plausible deniability that is particularly useful for them on the geopolitical/strategic, operational and tactical level, yet is a double-edged sword. PSMCs are more than passive players in their capacity as surrogates or proxies for governments. They have their own interests that don't necessarily have to align with the interest of their clients, and they act to satisfy them. It's a greater degree of autonomy of the surrogates' activities than it might seem<sup>7</sup>. This can be particularly problematic in democratic regimes, as there's a significant lack of effective regulation of the private security market on domestic, regional and international level, and, commonly, any oversight of their activities is weak at best. In democracies, the political expediency of the use of PSMCs also affects the civilian control over armed forces, one of the core pillars of democracy. PSMCs acting as an extended hand of governments also challenge the democratic principles of accountability and transparency<sup>8</sup> and raise additional questions connected to the attributability of their actions to states. All these issues can then generate behaviour on the part of the contractors that might be more prone to human rights violations and abuses or corruption.

The very specific nature of services PSMCs trade in requires a proper and comprehensive legal and regulatory framework, especially on the international level, to effectively and successfully regulate the existence, rights and responsibilities of private military and

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5. I.e. the reluctance to publicly admit or commit to contracting services of PMCs in conflict zones around the world by (mainly) Western governments.

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6. Many nation states' security forces gave up (deliberately or were forced to do so due to the economic burden keeping them would mean) some of their capabilities after the end of the Cold War, mainly for reasons related to the trend of increased professionalisation of the armed forces and the changing nature of the security landscape. Peter Singer rightly asserts that a "dependency syndrome on the private marketplace" of nation states' militaries has been created, chiefly in order to sustain the large-scale participations in counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (that also had a significant counterterrorism aspect to them) (Singer, 2007, p. 2). This "dependency syndrome" produces another set of (potentially dangerous) challenges on its own, especially in terms of the limited defence capabilities of nation states. It raises the question of the critical importance of maintaining the loyalty of contracted private security businesses that are motivated by economic/monetary profit, potentially adding yet another financial burden to governments, and thus also challenging the narrative of the cost-effectiveness of the use of PSMCs instead of regular militaries.

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7. For more on the theoretical and conceptual intricacies of proxy warfare, see Innes (2012) or Mumford (2013).

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8. As the public often doesn't know about the operations of PSMCs hired by their political representatives, even though taxpayers money is used to pay for the service of private security businesses.

security entities in order to ensure ethical, constructive and positive use of these actors. Nevertheless, to this day, the global private security market remains insufficiently regulated. One of the main reasons for this is that nation states, even though they make up a significant portion of the customer pool of the private security business, are reluctant to delegate at least some of the regulatory responsibilities to other actors in international relations. PSMCs are then regulated mainly on the state level, creating a patchwork of various regulatory frameworks in total. The most significant framework on the global level is embodied in the Montreux Initiative, i.e. the Montreux document, the Montreux +5 Conference and the Montreux Forum. This is a joint initiative of the government of Switzerland and the International Committee of the Red Cross that does not, however, create a new legal framework. This initiative merely gathers relevant existing international humanitarian laws and, based on them, proposes/recommends certain best practices applicable to states contracting the services of PSMCs operating in conflict and post-conflict environments, i.e. its provisions are non-binding ([International Committee of the Red Cross, 2008](#)). Along with the potential conflict of interests on the part of national governments, another major challenge to overcome when addressing the legal regulation of the private security market on the global level is to align the fundamentally different standpoints of actors that hire PSMCs, the states from which PSMCs operate and those in which they operate.

There have also been discussions, influenced by capitalist and free market ideas, that the most effective form of regulation of the global market is self-regulation. One of the manifestations of this idea is the International Code of Conduct (ICoC) for the private security industry and market, which is based on the principle of a voluntary multi-stakeholder mechanism. Its Association (ICoCA) consists of industry representatives, nation states and the civil society. ICoC can appear to represent the most significant framework for the regulation of the PSMCs' existence and operations to this day, as it has enacted a number of requirements for licensing, registration, vetting and training of personnel, limitations on the scope of permissible activities and accountability for violations, and, ultimately, also remedies for victims (International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers' Association).

## PSMCs and countering terrorism

### The GWOT era

The post-9/11 global security environment and the primary role of counterterrorism presented the private security market with plenty of opportunities. The scope of the PSMCs' involvement in counterterrorism campaigns initiated after the 9/11 attacks has been extensive. There are two major reasons why – first, engaging in high-tempo, high-intensity counterterrorism missions in many theatres across the globe by the US and its coalition at the same time led to a critical shortage of the resources and capabilities required to counter the terrorist threat. These gaps were filled by the private security market where needed (be it in terms of the resources state security forces had at their disposal, just not in sufficient numbers, or in terms of the capabilities state security forces were missing entirely from their toolkit). The second major reason behind the post-9/11 rapid spread of PSMCs' activities was the perceived (political) advantages of contracting commercial security services, particularly the political expediency they provide to political representatives. That led to a tendency to sub-contract the most controversial “black ops” traditionally carried out by state intelligence agencies in coordination with the state's Special Operations Forces (SOF) to private businesses to avoid scrutiny and direct accountability.

Besides PSCs that provided physical security to some of the military bases or diplomatic posts abroad and some of the soft targets at home, PMCs became an important instru-

ment of the counterterrorism efforts carried out as part of GWOT. The most notorious private entity contracted at that time was Blackwater USA. The main security functions Blackwater was hired to provide included the personal security detail to US State Department officials<sup>9</sup>, the training of CIA operatives to locate and, ultimately, assassinate al-Qaeda leaders, operations planning support, surveillance, operating unmanned aerial vehicles (including loading Hellfire missiles) at bases in Pakistan, and private clandestine aviation used to transport detained suspected al-Qaeda members to black sites (Scahill, 2007; Scahill, 2013). Other prominent PSMCs, CACI International, Inc. and Titan Corp. (now a subsidiary of L-3 Communications), provided interrogators and translators, respectively, to the prisons run by the US military in conflict zones, most notoriously to the Abu Ghraib prison camp where they allegedly participated in interrogations of prisoners that in many cases amounted to torture (Chatterjee and Thompson, 2004).

## State of the business today

After the boom in PSMCs' activity as part of GWOT, we can identify a certain reduction in their operations resulting from increased scrutiny and the generally bad reputation these businesses received because of some of the incidences of human rights violations that happened during GWOT. Some of the businesses consolidated their operations, mainly as falling under the narrower PSC concept (see above), i.e. consultancy, physical security of objects (including of oil facilities in conflict zones) and similar. Companies falling under the term PMC mainly ceased to operate, given the controversies surrounding their activities and, with increased scrutiny, also more elaborate, even if still not sufficient regulatory and oversight mechanisms.

However, with the gradual retreat of the US from the global stage as the world's sole superpower, several new developments may shake the somewhat consolidated global private security market. One of them is represented by the emboldened proposals formulated and advertised by the former founder and CEO of the infamous Blackwater USA, Erik Prince. Prince, sensing an opening in exploiting the weariness of the US politicians and populations with the long-term, large scale military engagements abroad in which counterterrorism is present as the dominant element on the battlefield, published several op-eds in newspaper journals, such as the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times in 2017. In those, Prince sought to pitch PSMCs' services as a cost-effective alternative to the existing status quo of the large military deployment in Afghanistan, stressing the supposed professionalism, expertise and effectiveness of private military contractors, demonstrating his arguments with flawed historical analogies (Prince, 2017)<sup>10</sup>. Prince also attempted to pitch a plan to deal with the migrant crisis in Libya with the deployment of private police (Kirchgaessner, 2017). Importantly, Libya has been in the state of civil war since the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, and many terrorist groups are believed to have established a foothold in the country (most notably ISIS). Any presence of the PSMC component in Libya could thus serve as a springboard to proxy potential counterterrorism operations in the country. Neither plan has yet materialised (or, at least, there has been no public record or revelation made that would suggest otherwise). The US-Taliban withdrawal deal of February 2020 that accelerated the withdrawal of the US (and, by extension, the coalition) forces from Afghanistan (without the Taliban committing to much in exchange) can, however, be interpreted as a gateway opening for the private security actors to fill the vacuum that will soon be created in the country by the unconditional withdrawal<sup>11</sup>.

Erik Prince is a central figure in another major development we can identify in the global private security market today, i.e. autocratic regimes that recognise the political and economic benefits of commercialising security, most notably China and Russia. When it

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9. *Consequentially complicating the coalition efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as the US State Department with their contracted private security personnel did not coordinate their actions with the US Department of Defense.*

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10. *On a YouTube channel, Wars of Waste, four videos detailing Prince's plan to privatise the conflict in Afghanistan were released around the same time as his op-eds were published. One of them is even in Dari, the official language of Afghanistan, in what is an obvious attempt to tilt the public opinion in favour of his proposal and to gain the sympathies of relevant political representatives in the US and in Afghanistan. The promotional video clips can be accessed here [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3fQXn0s98Y5qSDn1\\_OBqMA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3fQXn0s98Y5qSDn1_OBqMA) (Accessed: 15 September 2020).*

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11. *One might argue that the US President, Donald J. Trump, sought not only a pre-election victory in terms of the promise of bringing the US troops home from Afghanistan fulfilled, but also to let Prince's plan be implemented, out of the public sight once again, given the close relationship between President Trump and Erik Prince (Scahill and Cole, 2019).*

comes to China, the state-run investment fund CITIC Group is the largest shareholder in the Hong Kong-registered Frontier Services Group that was founded and co-led by none other than Erik Prince. The original declared corporate mission of FSG was to help Chinese businesses to work safely in Africa, including logistical projects for shipping routes in the continent and conducting high-risk evacuations from conflict zones (Cole and Scahill, 2016). The same company also won a contract to build a training centre in China's Xinjiang province (Reuters Staff, 2019). It is noteworthy that the training centre was built in the same region where China runs a system of re-education camps for the region's Muslim Uighur population (Campbell, 2019). Interestingly, China uses the terrorist label to describe Uighurs which can have broader implications for future PSMCs' activities as part of counterterrorism campaigns. No official or publicly available evidence exists suggesting FSG's involvement in construction or operation of the camps, yet the distinct security features of those camps may indicate at least some of it. Moreover, as the main stated area of interest of FSG is Africa, it is important to remember the level of terrorist threat across Africa remains considerably high. Therefore, the FSG encounter with a terrorist element on the continent, with a high risk of kidnappings, is to be expected (Jesus, 2013; Stratfor, 2019). As FSG has declared capabilities for evacuations for conflict zones, these can be utilised to prevent kidnappings as well. Also, in Africa, South African private security entities have already operated in Nigeria to help the government eliminate the threat of Boko Haram (The Conversation, 2015).

Another important actor on the global private security market is the Wagner Group (also known as Wagner PMC). It is a Russian private military organisation, registered in Hong Kong. The level of autonomy of Wagner's operations is, however, disputed as evidence exists tying the organisation to the Russian Ministry of Defence and its notorious military intelligence agency GRU (Marten, 2020)<sup>12</sup>. There has been some speculation about the role of Erik Prince in Wagner's activities as well (Cole and Emmons, 2020) that should not be dismissed without any examination, given Wagner's operating base, structure and procedures. Wagner is said to have taken part in combat operations in Ukraine, Libya<sup>13</sup> and in the Syrian civil war (Cole and Emmons, 2020; BBC, 2018). For the purposes of this article, it is important to keep in mind that Wagner is mainly deployed in a counterterrorism capacity in Syria, where it supports the regime forces of the embattled leader Bashar al-Assad who designated the opposition against his rule "terrorists". In this theatre, Wagner PMC reportedly operates tanks and artillery in support of the Russian-Syrian military operation (Sparks, 2016).

Most recently, Erik Prince declared in an interview with Fox News that he was officially bringing back the private military company Blackwater USA (Prince, 2020). Such a move can potentially have far reaching consequences for both the counterterrorism practice and the role of PSMCs in the future security environment. One of the reasons for Prince's decision could be his feeling of being emboldened by the US President Trump's disinterested, if not favourable attitude towards PSMCs in general. Prince may also be awaiting the opening of opportunities in Afghanistan and Iraq with the recently announced draw-down of the US forces from the two conflict zones (Seligman, 2020).

Many PSMCs have also established their presence in Africa because of the vast natural resource deposits on the continent, be it FSG in several African countries, Wagner in the Central African Republic (Reynolds, 2019), or the interest of various PSMCs in the Libyan theatre. Natural resources certainly were part of Erik Prince's calculus to advocate for privatising the war in Afghanistan. That being said, the character of the global privatised security market keeps evolving to secure sources of income other than payments from customers that hire them to provide security-related services. This could, potentially, add several different dynamics to the future counterterrorism campaigns, where PSMCs can

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12. In 2018, in what has become to be known as the Battle of Khasam, Wagner operatives engaged in a direct military confrontation with the US forces deployed in Syria when guarding an oil refinery in the area (Gibbons-Neff, 2018). This attack raised the question about the level of autonomy of Wagner's operations from the official foreign policy of Russia.

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13. Libya has been recently attracting private military businesses from around the world, including one Australian PMC. A documentary exploring this topic has been recently published on the ABC News In-depth YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yVc7cHG0ATs&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed: 14 September 2020).

cooperate with a different terrorist group on the ground tactically to extract natural resources, or, on the other hand, to act in their own name to eliminate competition for those sources of revenue in a specific geographical area.

## Future prospects

The contemporary and near-future context seems favourable to the expansion of PSMCs' operations on the global level. In many countries involved in GWOT, war fatigue among politicians and the ordinary populations has taken hold. This creates a great opportunity for the private security sector to leverage their connections to political representatives to expand their activities, potentially also in a more legitimised manner. The public pressure to minimise regular armed forces casualties (the so-called body-bag syndrome), the increasing calls to focus and spend taxpayer money on reforms at home (on health care, education programmes etc.) instead of during military deployments in foreign countries, along with possible financial savings related to the use of private security services<sup>14</sup>, and along with the expertise and advanced technology capabilities many PSMCs possess (and, perhaps, also their network of contacts that could be leverage to achieve mission objectives) might create an environment where the politicians and the public are more friendly to or inclined to tolerate PSMCs activities as an instrument of a nation's foreign and security policy. Importantly though, such a patron-client relationship could be beneficial for only as long as the interests of both actors in the relationship align or overlap. The anticipated resurgence of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS will also require a prompt counterterrorism response that many countries are not (politically) willing to commit their state security forces to. The global security landscape has also become increasingly dangerous for humanitarian workers and journalists working in conflict zones. In order to continue with their important work, their security and safety will have to be ensured. The services provided by the private security sector will, most likely, continue to be demanded by these actors.

Another important factor is the incentivised exploitation of natural resources that is, in many places, particularly in developing countries, closely tied to the activities of the private security sector. As many natural resource reserves get depleted and, depending on the customer demand, as adapting to the climate change requires new types of natural resources to be processed, PSMCs might become an indispensable partner in natural resources exploitation in areas where the security landscape is unstable and potentially dangerous. Another variable in this regard is the factor of population growth and the resulting competition among countries to secure food and energy resources to provide basic services to their growing populations, without a threat of direct confrontation among these states. With climate change accelerating and the environmental and security challenges it will present (massive migration flows, [proxy] conflicts over natural resources and alike), there is a real risk that security (and safety) will simply become a commodity for purchase. Only those be able to afford it (be it in monetary terms or in some barter exchange), will receive it, as people will probably fight over habitable and cultivable land and scarce water resources due to high temperatures and rising sea levels that will make many places inhabitable.

The newest developments and trends in the global privatisation of security has still not been matched by an updated and more efficient system of regulation and oversight on the international level. Although there have been increased calls from the industry itself for greater regulation of their existence and activities on the international level (for the sake of healthy competition and avoiding monopolisation of the market), the legal, regulatory, oversight, control and sanction mechanisms remain considerably weak for the same reasons as always— the reluctance of nation states to let an international body<sup>15</sup> decide about

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14. Even though the proclaimed cost-effectiveness of contracting PSMCs instead of deploying regular state armed forces is largely debatable. On top of that, taxpayers still pay for PSMCs services, just more indirectly and not so overtly. What is important to state here though is that any potential deployment of a PSMC contractor replacing, for instance, US/coalition forces in Afghanistan or Iraq would be a smaller-scale mission, it could, thereby, mean less money spent, as this such mission would, certainly, be limited in its mission objectives as well. What remains open is the question of the actual effectiveness of such surrogate efforts and their consequences.

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15. It is not even clear which body exactly should be responsible for the regulation and oversight of the private security market on the global level.

what many of them view as instruments of public safety and national security. Therefore, it is still the industry peer-pressure and the pressures related to the importance of a good reputation and brand name that represent one of the most significant regulatory and control mechanisms on the global level. It has still proven insufficient, as many companies with close ties to political representatives in various countries engage in profit-generating activities and, as a foreign policy tool of states, that could damage their reputation. The political expediency, and related plausible deniability, that is inherently linked to the PSMCs operations, when hired by state actors, is simply too attractive as it allows states to engage in proxy warfare without necessarily engaging directly. Such political expediency has also proven to be appealing in domestic contexts where PSMCs can be hired to provide their services in a “domestic counterterrorism capacity”, with the risk of doing so for political purposes.

## Conclusion

The participation of private military and security entities in counterterrorism efforts, especially since 9/11, has been extensive in practice. Any transparent inclusion of PSMCs in important strategic policy documents of nation states has been lacking. As there is no standardised approach to defining terrorism and to developing the best practices to counter the terrorist threat, nor is there a common shared understanding of how exactly PSMCs can contribute to counterterrorism efforts in either a preventive or reactive capacity. Given the character of the services these businesses offer and provide, it is reasonable for each actor responsible for counterterrorism campaigns to weigh carefully the potential benefits of any PSMCs’ involvement against the negative consequences of their activities and any potential blowback those may incite. What GWOT clearly revealed is the blurry line of what constitutes acceptable security-related activity to be outsourced to the private sector, and what activities should remain solely a state responsibility (such as manning and operating tanks and artillery weapons). In some cases, the relationship between a PSMC and a state is also unclear, thereby determining where to draw the lines is extremely difficult.

This article sought to answer two main research questions. First, to identify the major features of the private security involvement in counterterrorism efforts, it becomes clear that the potential the private security market has for counterterrorism efforts to be more effective has not been fully exploited. The prevailing services provided by the private security sector in this regard include physical security, strategic security assessments, logistical and consultancy support to counterterrorism efforts. The potential benefits have been, however, far more heavily outweighed by the detrimental aspects of their involvement, mainly because of the opportunity political representatives from many countries have seen in the political expediency contracting services of the private security industry would provide them with, particularly in the case of outsourcing tasks to PMCs. That has, consequentially, created many challenges to the practice of upholding democratic principles and human rights and freedoms while, simultaneously, attempting to eliminate (or at least minimise) the threat of terrorism. With the changing global security landscape, including the shifts in the balance of power in the international system, the current state of the business seems to evince new tendencies and to consolidate some of the existing ones. What is clear is that PSMCs will not go away any time soon.

To answer the second question, experiences from the past and the most prominent trends in privatisation security in the current global security environment, mainly regarding the existence and activities of PMCs, distinctly convey a new dawn of an increased PSMC activity (in both general and counterterrorism efforts) in the near future. The projected future security environment with all its main security challenges indicates that PSMCs

will become one of the major actors in international security relations, as climate change, conflicts over natural resources and the likely resurgence of the global terrorist threat, along with shifting power balances, will create a context conducive to states engaging in proxy conflicts rather than confronting each other directly. The reluctance of nation states to overtly engage in conflict areas around the world and to commit significant resources to missions of various international organisations (to seemingly focus more on reforms at home) can expand the private military and security industry exponentially. There is also a growing tendency to arbitrarily involve PSMCs in “domestic counterterrorism activities”. Such a development reinforces the urgency for a solid, effective regulatory, control and oversight mechanism on the international level. For as long as PSMCs provide nation states, the elementary unit of international relations, plausible deniability and political expediency, there will be no motivation for states to engage constructively in building a standardised framework of PSMCs’ existence and activities internationally. One way to accomplish that is to educate the public about the private military and security sector, its involvement in national security matters in general, and in counterterrorism in particular. Educated and informed citizens can then question and press their political representatives for more transparency and accountability of these actors.

This article is not intended to provide an exhaustive compilation of all aspects of the complex issues of the involvement of PSMCs in counterterrorism. It focused on certain, selected aspects and prominent features of the topic in order to identify the scope and the common characteristics of the involvement of PSMCs in counterterrorism efforts in the past and in the present to determine what the current trends are and what the future developments in the private security sector might be. There is still a plenty of room for future research, for instance comparing the activities of individual PSMCs in counterterrorism operations or comparing domestic legislative and regulatory frameworks of individual nation states to find any overlap and common ground for more internationalised regulation and control mechanisms of the private security industry.

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