

Growth in military contracting blurs lines of accountability

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The thriving use of private military contractors in place of citizen-soldiers allows nations to externalize the costs of war and outsource accountability during wartime, according to sociologist Katherine McCoy, writing in the winter 2009 issue of *Contexts* magazine.

A trend that has increased steadily since the Gulf [War](#), private military contracting is now a \$100 billion global industry that is projected to be worth up to \$200 billion by 2010. More private contractors work in the Iraq War than American soldiers.

"The privatization of the military workforce removes war one step away from the country that orders it, and internationalization removes it yet another," said McCoy, a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "When the workers of war become more remote and more invisible, the entry barriers to war are lowered."

In the Iraq War, the vast majority of [military contractors](#) for the [United States](#) come from other countries. Approximately 65 percent of these contractors are Iraqi, about a quarter are other foreigners and only about 10 percent are American. Non-American workers are routinely paid about one-tenth of what their American counterparts earn.

"The extensive use of military contractors changes the entire spectrum of military labor, shifting our conception of a military labor force from public to private, and from domestic to international," McCoy said.

Unlike the shared experience created by a public, national force in which citizens see the consequences of war illustrated by departing troops in uniform and flag-draped coffins, McCoy asserts that the use of private, mostly foreign troops externalizes the costs of war because contractors don't leave the same impression on the [public conscience](#). For this reason, McCoy says, companies sometimes enlist foreign contractors for high-risk or high-visibility combat roles.

"While casualties of American contract workers make headlines and political waves in the United States, the same is not true of captured or killed foreign contractors," McCoy said. "In Iraq, non-American contractors are the hidden casualties of war."

The shift to military outsourcing also undermines old lines of accountability, according to McCoy, creating problems both for protecting contractors' welfare and for holding them accountable for crimes.

The growing use of [private military contractors](#) has led many governments to consider legislation in an attempt to address the accountability question. In the United States, human rights organizations and other groups are advocating for contractors to be brought under the military chain of command, an issue likely to come before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2009.

At the international level, McCoy says, the United Nation's Working Group on the Use of Mercenaries has encouraged contractor recruitment countries to enact stricter domestic legislation to control the flow of their citizens to contracting positions abroad.

"Governments currently have neither the authority nor the responsibility over private employees that they have for their own citizen-soldiers operating abroad," McCoy said. "Until legislation is passed, private

contracted military forces will continue to be perceived simply as international labor migrants by their own governments and fellow citizens."

More information: www.contexts.org

Source: American Sociological Association

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