Employing private security companies in war cuts costs but causes problems

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New research from The University of Manchester is examining whether employing private security companies in war cuts costs but causes problems.

In recent years, private military and security companies have been used to bolster state troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though supposed to cut the costs of war, both financially and personally, new research has revealed a number of moral problems that arise from their use, and that regulating the industry may miss the point entirely.

Dr James Pattison suggests that private contractors are more likely to be motivated by financial gain than regular soldiers, and are often viewed by the public as mercenaries. This can make it harder to win the hearts and minds of the local population, which is crucial in certain operations. Also, unlike soldiers, private contractors are free to select the wars in which they fight, raising issues of democratic control, as the armed forces follow orders set by an elected government, whilst private companies do not.

Often acting outside of full governmental oversight and ineffectively regulated by international law, criticism of private security companies has mainly focussed on the involvement of contractors in the violation of civilians' human rights. Attempts have been made in recent times to improve the accountability of the industry, however Dr Pattison argues that these attempts do not and cannot address the deep moral problems that come with fighting wars in this way.

"There is a general perception in neoliberal countries such as the US and UK that privatising will save money," says Dr Pattison, Senior Lecturer in Politics at The University of Manchester. "Using these private companies instead of deploying more troops costs less because you don't have to pay for people's pensions, and you only have to pay them while they are at war. States also prefer to bolster their armed forces with private security contractors, because it is difficult to significantly increase your presence in a region without more regular soldiers coming back in body-bags, which has a whole host of political costs."

Dr Pattison's findings, based on research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, are explored in his book The Morality of Private War, which identifies a number of moral problems raised by the use of private security companies in war zones.

Governments employ private military and security companies to provide a number of services, including the training of troops and security forces, the provision of transportation and logistics, and the protection of state officials. However, when governments employ private contractors it circumvents many of the constitutional and parliamentary constraints that are normally placed on them when deciding to send troops into action, such as a debate in parliament. Using contractors therefore gives governments further scope to start wars covertly, or to extend the size of state involvement without public debate beforehand.

"If states can employ private security companies to circumvent some of the constraints of international law, then it makes it easier for them to go to war. This could make wars more likely, and potentially make them last longer in the future," says Dr Pattison.

Efforts have been made to increase regulation of the industry, however Dr Pattison believes that although these efforts and initiatives have had some positive impact, they have done little to address the more basic

issue of whether it is morally acceptable to use private military forces.

"There have been moves to develop the international code of conduct which is a form of self-regulation in the industry, but I think that is basically just window dressing and has a potential for legitimating the industry.

"The ethical problems associated with use of private security companies are not simply contingent on the lack of regulation. They are deeper in that they cannot be addressed by regulation alone. Ultimately, their use should be eschewed, given the significant ethical concerns."

Provided by University of Manchester

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