

Private Security Companies' Firearms Stockpiles

The private security industry has come under considerable international scrutiny due to the highly publicized role it has played in Afghanistan and Iraq. Attention has mostly focused on questions concerning governmental oversight and these companies' accountability. Comparatively, little has been written on the types and numbers of firearms held by private security companies (PSCs), especially in countries considered at peace. Based on a forthcoming Small Arms Survey yearbook chapter, this *Research Note* examines PSC firearm holdings – their scale and variation across settings. PSCs here refer to all legally registered business entities that provide, on a contractual basis, security or military services regardless of whether they operate in situations of conflict.

Information on PSC arms holdings is scarce and lacks precision. States that maintain firearm registration systems do not always distinguish between civilian- and PSC-held firearms. In some countries, PSC employees can carry their personal weapons while on duty, further complicating accounting. In other cases, personnel have been reported to carry illegal—thus unrecorded—firearms (Das, 2010). These different factors make it particularly challenging to draw a comprehensive picture of PSC firearm holdings.

Available reports suggest that generally not all PSC staff carry firearms in countries consid-

ered at peace. PSCs in Latin America appear to be more armed than in other regions, but ratios remain systematically below one firearm per employee (see Table). A survey of the industry in Europe reveals that the proportion of PSC personnel that is authorized to be armed is about 40 per cent in Bulgaria, just under 25 per cent in Slovenia, Spain and Turkey, and below 10 per cent in Croatia, Germany and Sweden (CoESS, 2008). The fact that PSCs exercise a variety of functions, many of which do not necessitate weapon use – such as risk analysis and security advice – explain these relatively low levels of armament. Moreover, PSC personnel who are permitted to carry firearms often do not each have their own weapon, nor do they always carry one. Guns may be stored in a central armoury and shared by employees from shift to shift.

Conflict-affected areas such as Afghanistan and Iraq experience much higher levels of PSC firearm holdings. In such settings, industry sources argue that maintaining weapon capabilities at least equal or superior to potential attackers' is crucial. In practice, this translates into PSCs being armed at levels comparable to state security forces, as reports of more than three firearms per PSC personnel in Afghanistan illustrate (see Table). In contrast, law enforcement personnel worldwide hold an estimated average 1.2 firearms per officer, while the military generally keep more than one and sometimes as many as ten weapons per soldier (Small Arms Survey, 2006, pp. 43–44).

Significant differences exist across settings when it comes to the types of weapons used by PSCs. A number of countries actually prohibit PSCs from using firearms on their territory, including the Bahamas,² Denmark, Japan, Kenya, the Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, and the UK.³ A survey of the industry across 34 European states reveals that the vast majority of PSCs are only allowed to use handguns (pistols and revolvers) (CoESS, 2008). Smooth-bore firearms (such as shotguns) are authorized in few countries, and almost all European countries prohibit PSCs from using automatic firearms. Fully automatic firearms are also banned from PSC use in Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, Peru,⁴ and South Africa.⁵ Exceptions include Angola, where PSCs continue to use AK-47 assault rifles (Joras and Schuster, 2008, pp. 40, 56). In Turkey, PSCs may use MP5 sub-machine guns and G3 rifles for the protection of oil refineries, oil wells, and power plants (CoESS, 2008). PSCs operating in Afghanistan

Table Reported PSC firearms in selected settings, various years¹

Location or company	Total PSC personnel	PSC firearms	Firearms per PSC personnel
Russian Federation	800,000	116,000	0.15
Brazil	570,000	301,526	0.53
South Africa	248,025	58,981	0.24
Colombia	120,000	82,283	0.69
Angola	35,715	12,087	0.34
Serbia	28,000	2,395	0.09
El Salvador	21,146	18,125	0.86
Nicaragua	19,710	6,799	0.34
Costa Rica	19,558	8,884	0.45
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4,207	1,075	0.26
Albania	4,093	938	0.23
35 PSCs in Afghanistan	1,431	4,968	3.47

and Iraq also operate a wide variety of weapons, including 9 mm handguns, 7.62 mm assault rifles, as well as general-purpose machine guns.

An examination of PSC firearm holdings merits greater scrutiny. Their numbers may represent but a small fraction of total civilian stockpiles, yet the more interesting question is how they relate to certain state security sector holdings, and what does this say about the state's role in upholding law and order. Moreover, oversight and transparency regarding their stockpiles is often slim at best. In many countries, official standards for the management and safeguarding of PSC weapons, as well as for the training of PSC personnel, are non-existent (da Silva, 2010). Confidentiality of internal PSC procedures also makes an evaluation of industry standards and performance particularly difficult. Many PSCs are *themselves* addressing these and other concerns – such as their means of acquisition and safe storage – a subject to be addressed in a forthcoming *Research Note*. ■

Sourcing

This *Research Note* is based on Nicolas Florquin, 'A Booming Business: Private Security and Small Arms,' *Small Arms Survey 2011: States of Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming. Sarah Meek Fellow Natalie Jaynes revised the text for this *Research Note*.

Notes

- 1 Sources: Carballido Gómez (2008, slide 9); CoESS (2008); CPDE and Saferworld (2005, p. 38); Dreyfus et al. (2010, p. 100); Godnick (2009); Gould and Lamb (2004, p. 185); Joras and Schuster (2008, p. 46); Krzalic (2009, p. 34, fn. 38); Modestov (2009); Page et al. (2005, p. 93); UNODC (2006, p. 59).
- 2 Correspondence with William Godnick, UN Regional Centre for Peace, Disarmament and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean (UN-LiREC), 21 October 2010.
- 3 CoESS (2008); da Silva (2010, p. 2); Jones and Newburn (2006, pp. 23, 228).
- 4 See Arias (2009, p. 79).
- 5 See South Africa (2000, ch. 2, sec. 4.1).

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The project has an international staff with expertise in security studies, political science, international public policy, law, economics, development studies, conflict resolution, sociology and criminology, and works closely with a world-wide network of researchers and partners.

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