

IN DEPTH

Militarisation of public security

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Although assessing militarisation on a global scale is not easy, efforts have been made in this direction by means of defining indicators collected in several countries. Notable here is the work carried out in the Global Peace Index (GPI) which compares 163 countries with the aim of ascertaining the level of peace in each one. It is produced every year by the Institute for Economics and Peace whose headquarters are in Sydney, Australia. The GPI is a complex index bringing together three dimensions: 1) ongoing internal and international conflicts; 2) public and social security; and 3) militarisation. It aims to promote broader understanding of the level of peace in the countries by classifying peace in a way that goes beyond the mere presence or absence of wars.

The first dimension includes indicators like the number and duration of internal conflicts, the number of people killed in external conflicts, and the involvement of the country in these international conflicts. The second, broader and more complex dimension includes such indicators as the number of refugees, the scale of political terror (authoritarian practices), the figures for violent crime, the homicide rate, the prison population and police, political instability (measured, for example, by the probability of violent public demonstrations), and individual access to firearms. The third dimension is concerned with indicators like the percentage of military expenditure in relation with GDP, the total number of military personnel, and the volume of arms exports and imports per 100,000 inhabitants. The methodology is complex and very well described in the [Report \[1\]](#) itself, which also provides an account of the sources for each indicator comprising the Index. The GPI is, without a doubt, a bold and innovative way of evaluating peace.

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The most recent edition of the GPI, from 2021, shows that the average level of peace fell by 0.07%, the ninth worsening of the indicator in the last thirteen years, with eighty-seven countries showing improvement and seventy-three deterioration. Nevertheless, this percentage increase is the second smallest in the history of the Index. Hence, the GPI 2021 reveals a world in which the conflicts and crises that appeared in the last decade have started to recede and that, in their stead, is a new surge of tension and uncertainty deriving from the Covid-19 pandemic and rising tensions among several of the major powers.

The 2021 Report also notes that the dimension of militarisation was the only one that has improved, with a slight increase of 4.2% since 2008. The figure for military personnel per 100,000 inhabitants fell in 111 countries, while military expenditure in relation with GDP dropped in eighty-seven countries. However, this is a slow, heterogeneous trend, even including backsliding in many countries, especially with revived tensions among the powers that are stronger in economic and military terms. The Middle East and North Africa were the regions that showed the greatest deterioration in the indicator for military expenditure.

Militarisation of public security in Brazil and other countries of Latin America

Militarisation of public security has several characteristics. The presence of military personnel in strategic government posts, and subordination of the police to the armed forces are two examples. However, the most striking feature is use of the armed forces for activities related with citizen security.

This displacement of the functions of the armed forces is a problem for several reasons, first and foremost because the mission of the armed forces is to guarantee national defence and territorial integrity, mainly by protecting the nation-state from an external enemy. Public security, on the other hand, seeks to protect citizens and safeguard their life and freedom, with a focus on the individual and guaranteeing order so that everyday life in cities and rural areas will be possible. These are quite different missions, and they require distinct and even opposite forms of action. The logic of national defence is much closer to the logic of war and fighting an enemy. The logic of public security should be keeping order, managing conflicts, preventing crime and violence, and enforcing the law. Training, procedures, command structure, and decision making are very different in each case.

“Trivialisation of the exceptional use of the armed forces in public security brings the logic of war, resulting in serious human rights violations”

Accordingly, although the laws of different countries allow exceptional use of the armed forces in public security, trivialisation of this use brings the logic of war into routine public security, resulting in serious human rights violations and inefficiency in public security activities, while also causing damage in the armed forces themselves since they are being used for activities for which they are not properly prepared.

Brazil is an interesting case of this undue participation of military forces in public security. National legislation permits the use of the armed forces in the domain of public security when the local security forces are not sufficient in certain situations that require exceptional intervention for a specified time. These military operations to guarantee public order are known as *Garantia da Lei e da Ordem* (GLO). “Ministry of Defence (MD) data reveal that, between 1992 and 2019, the armed forces were used on twenty-five occasions of military police strikes; in twenty-two missions established to “guarantee voting and counting” in electoral processes; in thirty-eight events requiring security support; and in twenty-eight missions that included public security, protection

of public goods, strikes in other sectors, escorts, etcetera (Ministry of Defence, 2019). It is also important to highlight the role of the armed forces in security at mass events, such as those held in Brazil between 2013 and 2016, namely the FIFA Confederations Cup (2013), World Youth Day (2013), the FIFA World Cup (2014), and the Olympic Games (2016). However, internal use of the armed forces does not occur only in such evidently exceptional situations as the above. Since 1992, the Brazilian armed forces have been called out on at least twenty-three GLO missions to act against urban violence, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where eleven such deployments were sent to combat crime waves arising from the high rates of violence that chronically plague these regions” (Salvadori[2], 2020, p. 16). These figures reveal an excessive use of the armed forces for dealing with challenges in the domain of public security, in particular in zones known for their chronic violence.

The negative consequences of the use of armed forces in these circumstances can be illustrated by the case of the musician Evaldo and the tin can collector Luciano who were murdered in Rio de Janeiro in April 2019. They died riddled with bullets from more than 200 shots fired by an army convoy at the car in which the musician and his family were travelling because, it was claimed, the vehicle had ignored a roadblock.[3]

“In Latin America, the use of the armed forces has intensified in public security. The expansion and complexity of organised crime has been a major argument in favour of this use”

It is not only in Brazil that use of the armed forces has intensified in public security. It is happening in Latin America in general. The expansion and complexity of organised crime has been a major argument in favour of this use. “The result is that police capabilities are not enough for keeping order since criminal groups are using military techniques and resources in a long-term economic—and, increasingly, also political—context (Ramalho, Diamint, Sánchez, 2020, p. 5).[4]

Although many countries of Latin America are experiencing this process of militarisation of public security, every place has its own dynamics and particularities. The involvement of the military in the Cold War, the idea of fighting the enemy and, after the war, against drugs, and the subsequent war on terror (influenced by the United States) have contributed to the fact that each of the countries of Latin America has set the bounds between the armed forces and security forces in its own way. In Colombia and Venezuela, for example, there is greater “symbiosis” between the military and the public security forces, which presents the more operative challenge as to how they should work together and in respect for the law. At the other extreme are Uruguay and Argentina, where society does not accept the risk that the military will once again resort to human rights violations. Between these two poles are countries like Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador where the relationship between the armed and security forces has been used, in ways that are not always exceptional and controlled, in the struggle against transnational crime and in the pursuit of internal order, which has had serious repercussions with regard to human rights. Besides complaints against the military, there are constant cases of forced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, and violations of due process.

Another important dimension of this phenomenon is militarisation of the police. Even civilian police forces end up repeating aspects of military-style behaviour that are detrimental for human rights and for public security itself. Intensification of violence through police lethality, the practice of torture, other kinds of violence in stop and frisk operations, and the idea of “taking the law into one’s own hands” to finish off the enemy has been a significant dimension characterising this militarisation of security forces. It also frequently happens that, within the police forces themselves, the most highly valued departments are those of specialised troops that are deployed to act in specific situations, which requires special training and procedures, usually linked to the warrior ethos, including uniforms that evoke a heightened militarism. These police forces enjoy much greater prestige than the ordinary patrol officer, who interacts with citizens and usually does not bear arms. To a large extent, this excessive esteem for the “warrior” accounts for the militarisation of the security forces.

One example that provides a useful illustration of this militarisation in the reality of Brazil is the so-called *Operación Policial Exceptis*, carried out in Rio de Janeiro in May 2020. Some two hundred police, armed for “a war”,^[5] killed twenty-eight people in a raid on the Jacarezinho favela. The police raid took place in spite of the fact that the Federal Supreme Court had suspended such police operations in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro during the pandemic.

“The real increase in violence and criminality, as well as growing fear and feelings of insecurity, have fuelled legitimisation of entirely repressive public security policies”

It is necessary to emphasise that “militarisation is not always desirable, necessary or inevitable. Neither does its intensification always mean greater state ability to confront common or organised crime. [...] Although there is a strong incentive for the military to develop police-style capacities, this does not mean that it drives the process. Indeed, some see it as a diversion from their key missions, while others understand it as a means to obtain equipment and secure their participation in political decision-making. Moreover, the process of militarising the police to endow it with army-like capacities, for example shooting down the enemy, use of large-calibre weapons, and resort to military jurisdiction, *inter alia*, is quite complex and dysfunctional” (Ramalho, Diamint, Sánchez^[6], 2020, p. 5).

Recommendations

In addition to the historical background and military legacy in the various contexts described above, especially in Brazil and other Latin American countries, there are aspects of public security policies that help to explain this close relationship between the armed forces and public security. It is important to understand them in order to think of ways to surmount them.^[7]

As a general rule, security policies are focused almost exclusively on the application of criminal law, “dealing with crime after it happens”, and giving priority to repression of crime and the punitive paradigm. The real increase in violence and criminality, as well as growing fear and feelings of insecurity, have fuelled legitimisation of entirely repressive public security policies, frequently in direct opposition to human rights and democracy. In this situation, discourse calling for harsher penalties, the creation of new crimes, police violence and tougher treatment of criminals is repeated in society and ends up being heeded by governments. This creates a vicious circle of demand and response in the field of public security, which is unable to deal with the factors that generate and structure violence. Accordingly, use of the armed forces and excessive militarisation of policies is even more rife.

“It is particularly important to adhere to a more coherent understanding of public security, combining repression of crimes and violence with a dimension of prevention, and working on medium and long-term policies”

Even in cases where repression is necessary, as would be the case of organised crime, lack of rationality, technical skills, and even the political will to deal properly with such situations, means that this option ends up being highly inefficient as well as causing major human rights violations. The view that the criminal must be punished, whatever the price, is used to justify many of these violations.

In these circumstances, it is particularly important that political leaders should be able to adhere to a more coherent understanding of public security, combining repression of crimes and violence with a dimension of prevention, focusing on factors of risk and protection, and working on medium and long-term policies at the local level to address them.

It is important, too, that these political leaders should be capable of publicly stating that the effectiveness of public security policies depends on due respect for laws and

human rights, strengthening data-driven policing, together with ongoing planning and accountability. Punishment, per se, should not be the core response to crime. Priority needs to be given to investigating and solving the most serious crimes like homicide, for example.

Finally, active involvement by society is necessary for security policies, as is the establishment of clear regulations on the use of violence that will protect all citizens as well as the security forces themselves.

With prevention policies, the police working with intelligence, planning, and respecting the law, and with the active participation of society in these policies, the population will see much more tangible results, and the eventual need for the armed forces to act in the domain of public security will tend to diminish.

[Article translated from the original in Spanish]

[1] For access to a more detailed account of the indicator, see [page 75](#) of the Report.

[2] Salvadori, Mariana Paula. *O uso de Forças Armadas em Segurança Pública: o caso do Rio de Janeiro*, Master's degree thesis, Brasília, DF, March 2020.

[3] [This case](#) is telling for many reasons. The most recent is that, for the first time, the military personnel involved were tried and convicted in the first instance by the military justice system.

[4] Ramalho, Antonio Jorge; Diamint, Rut; Sánchez, Lisa. *La militarización de la seguridad y el retorno de los militares a la política en América Latina*, Fundación Friedrich Ebert, March 2020.

[5] See [this link](#).

[6] Ramalho, Antonio Jorge; Diamint, Rut; Sánchez, Lisa. *La militarización de la seguridad y el retorno de los militares a la política en América Latina*, Fundación Friedrich Ebert, March 2020.

[7] An interesting set of recommendations on the matter for Latin America as a whole may be found at: Cano, Ignacio; Arévalo, Bernardo. *Violencia, Estado y Sociedad en América Latina*, Fundación Friedrich Ebert, March 2020.

About the author

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Photography

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil October 26th, 2017- Special Force Battalion search for druglords after a spanish tourist be killed during a visit to the Rocinha slum. By Antonio Scorza (Shutterstock).