Mercenaries and Marketed Might: Private Military Companies in Contemporary Conflicts

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Introduction

Private military companies (PMCs) have become fixtures of contemporary conflict, operating at the seam between public authority and private enterprise. From the highways of Iraq to mining corridors and counterinsurgency theaters across Africa, these firms guard convoys and embassies, train partner forces, maintain aircraft and armored vehicles, secure offshore platforms, and, in some cases, support kinetic operations. Their expansion has redrawn the map of who provides security, who profits from it, and who is accountable when things go wrong.

The drivers behind this growth are as pragmatic as they are political. States outsource for surge capacity, cost predictability, speed, and, at times, deniability. Corporations seek to protect people and assets in volatile markets without becoming de facto belligerents. PMCs, for their part, leverage veteran labor pools, modular contracts, and technology—from commercial drones to satellite connectivity—to deliver services once monopolized by state militaries. This political economy of privatized force is not a passing anomaly; it reflects structural changes in how wars are financed, fought, and framed to domestic and international audiences.

Yet the rise of PMCs has outpaced the rules that govern them. International humanitarian law was not written with corporate platoons or outsourced air maintenance in mind; domestic licensing regimes vary widely; and soft-law initiatives depend on voluntary compliance. Where regulatory gaps widen, accountability can falter: civilian harm may go unremedied, lines of command blur, and the state’s monopoly on legitimate violence erodes. At the same time, a blanket rejection of private actors ignores the reality that many governments and firms will continue to rely on them—and that better outcomes depend on getting the governance right.

This book takes a clear-eyed approach. It profiles key actors and their business models, explains their legal status under the law of armed conflict and national legislation, and assesses how contracting choices ripple into battlefield conduct and post-incident accountability. Through case studies spanning Iraq, Afghanistan, maritime security off the Horn of Africa, and African theaters from the Sahel to the Lake Chad Basin, it examines where PMCs have delivered tactical gains—and where they have introduced strategic and reputational liabilities.

The intended readership is equally practical. Policymakers will find guidance on designing solicitations and contracts that align incentives, embed oversight, and preserve state control. Corporate risk managers will find tools for vendor due diligence, workforce vetting, insurance and indemnities, duty-of-care frameworks, and crisis response. Throughout, the book emphasizes measurable oversight—key

performance indicators, incident reporting standards, and audit trails—that translate principle into practice.

Terminology matters, and precision is part of governance. The chapters distinguish PMCs from private security companies (PSCs), map the spectrum of services from static guarding to intelligence support, and track the gray zones—information operations, cyber enablement, and training that edges toward combat support—where roles and responsibilities often become contested. Attention is also given to market dynamics: consolidation among firms, the rise of state-aligned corporate constellations, and the interplay of sanctions, export controls, and insurance markets.

Mercenaries and Marketed Might proceeds from a simple premise: private force is neither inherently remedy nor inherently threat. It is a tool—powerful, profitable, and prone to abuse without the right constraints. By tracing how PMCs shape today’s conflicts and how laws and contracts can shape them in turn, the book aims to equip readers to make smarter decisions, reduce harm, and uphold accountability where it is most fragile.

CHAPTER ONE: From Hirelings to Contractors: A Brief History

The concept of private individuals or groups engaging in armed conflict for compensation, rather than patriotic fervor or political ideology, is far from a modern invention. Indeed, the mercenary, or "soldier of fortune," has been a recurring character throughout the annals of human warfare, popping up in diverse cultures and conflicts across millennia. Their evolution from individual hirelings to sophisticated corporate entities reflects not only changes in military technology and strategy but also the shifting political and economic landscapes of states and empires.

Ancient civilizations, despite their often-vaunted citizen-soldier ideals, frequently augmented their forces with foreign fighters. The earliest evidence of mercenaries can be traced back to ancient Egypt. Pharaohs and empires, facing perennial conflict and the need for manpower, found it expedient to recruit skilled warriors from beyond their borders. These early professionals offered a pragmatic solution to military shortages or the need for specialized combat techniques not readily available within their own populations.

The ancient Greeks, renowned for their hoplite phalanxes, also made extensive use of mercenaries. From the 6th century BCE onward, Greek city-states and powerful individuals hired bodyguards and specialized troops from other city-states and even farther afield. Cretan archers, for instance, were highly sought after for their ranged combat skills, while hoplites-for-hire were prized as heavy infantry. It wasn't uncommon for these Greek mercenaries to find themselves fighting for—or even against—their countrymen. A particularly famous example is the "Ten Thousand," a large force of Greek mercenaries hired by Cyrus the Younger in 401 BCE to help him seize the Persian throne from his brother, Artaxerxes II. Their arduous journey and fighting retreat, chronicled by Xenophon, underscored both their martial prowess and their mercenary motivation.

Moving into the Roman era, while the legions themselves were a highly professionalized state-run military, the empire occasionally engaged foreign auxiliaries, and even within the Roman system, there were parallels to private contracting for specific services. However, the classical mercenary tradition truly flourished again during the Middle Ages in Europe. As feudal levies proved increasingly inadequate for prolonged campaigns or specialized tasks, rulers and city-states turned to "free companies" or "great companies." These were essentially roving bands of professional soldiers, often demobilized veterans, who sold their services to the highest bidder. They were a motley crew, a cultural hodgepodge of English, German,

Breton, and Hungarian adventurers, among others, known for their martial skills but also their penchant for plunder when not officially employed.

One of the most infamous of these groups was the White Company, led by the English knight Sir John Hawkwood, which operated in Italy during the latter half of the 14th century. These companies often negotiated detailed contracts, or *condotte*, with their employers, outlining terms of service and payment. This gave rise to the term "condottieri" for the Italian mercenary captains who led these forces. These *condottieri* were not merely soldiers but military entrepreneurs, developing advanced tactics and organizational structures, and some even rose to considerable political power, becoming de facto rulers of territories.

The 17th century marked a high point for mercenary use in Europe, particularly during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Armies during this devastating conflict were often composed almost entirely of hired mercenary units. The war, however, also inadvertently contributed to the decline of the traditional mercenary system. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 strengthened the concept of the nation-state, leading to the gradual establishment of standing armies loyal to the state rather than to a paymaster.

Despite this shift, mercenaries didn't vanish entirely. The 18th century saw continued, albeit more formalized, use of foreign troops. The British, for instance, famously hired regiments from various German principalities, collectively known as Hessians, to supplement their forces during the American Revolutionary War. These "Hessians" became a significant, and often vilified, component of the British war effort, highlighting the political sensitivities surrounding the use of foreign hirelings in national conflicts.

Perhaps the most significant historical precursor to the modern Private Military Company (PMC) was the British East India Company. Founded in 1600 as a trading entity, the EIC gradually amassed immense political and military power in India. To protect its vast commercial interests and enforce its rule, the Company developed its own formidable private army. At its peak in the early 19th century, this force numbered around 250,000 soldiers, making it larger than many national armies of the time, and twice the size of the British Army at certain points.

The EIC's army was composed primarily of Indian soldiers, known as sepoys, commanded by British officers. They were trained in European military tactics and equipped with Western weaponry, proving highly effective in expanding and defending the Company's territories against rival European powers and local Indian rulers. The Company's military operations were extensive, ranging from interventions in neighboring states like Nepal and Afghanistan to deployments as far afield as Egypt and China. The EIC truly exemplified a private entity exercising sovereign-like military power, driven by commercial interests rather than direct state mandates, though

ultimately serving British imperial ambitions. This intricate blend of private enterprise and military might offers a compelling historical parallel to contemporary PMCs. The Company's eventual dissolution in 1874, following the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the British government's direct assumption of control over India, marked the end of an era for such a large-scale private military force.

The 20th century, particularly after World War II, saw a period where the concept of the mercenary acquired a distinctly negative connotation, often associated with destabilizing post-colonial conflicts in Africa. International and national laws began to increasingly view mercenaries as less entitled to protections under the rules of war. However, even during this time, private individuals and groups continued to engage in armed conflicts for profit, though often operating in a more clandestine manner. The French Foreign Legion, for example, founded in the 19th century, also represents a form of organized foreign military service, though distinct from pure mercenary activity due to its official state affiliation.

The roots of modern Private Military Companies, as distinct from individual mercenaries, can be traced back to the Cold War era. During this period, the United States and the Soviet Union, among other major powers, utilized private military contractors for a variety of tasks, including logistics, infrastructure management, combat service support, and even covert operations. These engagements, while not always in the public eye, laid some of the groundwork for the more overt proliferation of PMCs in later decades.

One of the earliest examples of a modern, organized PMC was WatchGuard International, founded in 1965 by Colonel David Stirling, a veteran of the British Special Air Service (SAS). WatchGuard aimed to provide officially registered and state-controlled mercenary services, primarily operating in the Arabian Peninsula, offering military training and counter-insurgency advice to governments. This demonstrated an early attempt to professionalize and legitimize the private provision of military services, even if the "mercenary" label still loomed large.

The true resurgence and evolution of private military companies into their contemporary form, however, accelerated dramatically with the end of the Cold War. The global geopolitical shift led to significant military drawdowns in many nations, particularly in the West, releasing a vast pool of highly trained military personnel into the civilian workforce. Concurrently, a glut of cheap, often Soviet-made, weaponry flooded the international market. This combination created a ready supply of skilled labor and materiel for a burgeoning private military industry.

Furthermore, the post-Cold War era witnessed a rise in intra-state conflicts, particularly in fragile states lacking the capacity to provide their own security. Without the traditional great power patronage of the Cold War, these nations became fertile ground for private military actors to fill the security vacuum. These firms offered a

range of services, from security details and logistics to direct combat support, providing a means for states to reassert control and maintain some semblance of order.

A pivotal moment in this modern resurgence was the rise of Executive Outcomes (EO) in South Africa. Founded in 1989 by Eeben Barlow, a former lieutenant-colonel in the South African Defence Force, EO initially focused on providing specialist covert training. However, the company gained significant notoriety and global attention in the 1990s for its direct military involvement in conflicts in Angola and Sierra Leone. Executive Outcomes demonstrated the capacity of a private company to field a highly trained and equipped force, complete with armor, helicopters, and fixed-wing aircraft, to achieve decisive military outcomes for its clients. Their success in stabilizing situations for governments, particularly in countries rich in mineral resources, highlighted the potential for PMCs to operate as sophisticated military forces, rather than just small bands of individual mercenaries.

Executive Outcomes, with its corporate structure and emphasis on professional military services, began to challenge the traditional, often pejorative, understanding of "mercenary." While still controversial and often labeled as mercenaries by critics, companies like EO represented a significant shift towards a more organized, commercially driven approach to private military services. Their activities sparked intense debate regarding accountability, ethical conduct, and the blurring lines between state and non-state actors in warfare, setting the stage for the even greater proliferation of PMCs that would occur in the 21st century.

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