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The use of mercenaries, mercenary-related actors and private military and security companies in organized criminal activities and illicit networks in Latin America and the Caribbean

1 Introduction

The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has witnessed an exponential expansion in the involvement of mercenaries, mercenary-related actors, and private military and security companies (PMSCs) in various contexts of insecurity. **Currently, while PMSCs have increased their presence, mercenary activities have declined in the region, although they remain active in particular in the Andes, Central America and Mexico working mainly with drug cartels or political criminal groups.**[1]

These actors have been active in several countries in the region, operating in multiple forms, manifestations, and contexts. Mercenaries were most active in the 1980s, when many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean were experiencing armed conflicts, while private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies (PSCs) began to grow in terms of the number of contractual agreements from the 1990s onwards.[2]

On the one hand, **the PMSCs** mostly provide 'military and security support' to governments, often invited by governments with the purpose of reinforcing security, combating crime, dismantling criminal groups or other non-state armed actors that pose a risk to national security, addressing armed conflicts and humanitarian crises, and filling security gaps.[3] At the same time, they provide services to the Latin American extractive industry, such as transnational mining companies.[4] Despite these actors operating in legal gray areas[5] (because of the broad scope and nature of functions entrusted), their intervention has been on the rise in recent decades.

On the other hand, **mercenaries and mercenary-related actors are often linked to criminal and illegal activities, for example, through collaboration with drug cartels or other criminal organizations, as well as the commission of human rights violations.** They operate under the orders and needs of criminal leaders and non-state armed actors. Latin American mercenaries are in high demand both within and outside the region due to their solid military expertise. Mercenaries represent a comparatively limited presence in Latin America and the Caribbean, but they are still active.

As defined above, although both actors are distinct, including from a legal perspective, on the ground, certain activities carried out by PMSCs may approach functional definitions of mercenaries.

All these actors and activities pose specific **challenges for security and human rights in the LAC region.** The involvement of PMSCs in functions reserved for the state can violate national sovereignty, create gaps in accountability, lack oversight mechanisms, and violate human rights

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[1] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[2] Charlotte Penel *The Transformation of Security Institutions in Latin America: The Market for Force of Commercial Military Security Actors*, Master's thesis, University of Liverpool, 2021
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

(power abuse), while the involvement of mercenaries in illegal activities and illicit economies fuels violence and leads to serious human rights abuses.

In addition, there are **serious concerns about their implications for human rights and security**, as they are often armed and due to the type of services they provide, especially in the case of mercenaries. A study highlights that **PMSCs operating in the region are among the most heavily armed worldwide**[6], constituting a notable regional characteristic.

This document outlines the main characteristics and operations of these actors in Latin America and the Caribbean, and presents national cases based on public investigations and media reports.

2 Private military and security companies (PMSCs)

The Latin America and Caribbean Commercial Military Security Actors (LACCSMA) dataset developed at the University of Liverpool defines PMSC as "private business entities that provide force and force-related services, such as military or security consultancy, training to local security or armed forces, intelligence, or security work, irrespective of how they describe themselves."[7]

They are typically legally registered as local or international companies and operate in exchange for financial compensation, without being part of the armed forces or police.[8] However, experts underscore that PMSCs often operate in legal gray areas due to ambiguous regulatory frameworks and legal gaps. In particular, these include the absence of a binding international regulatory framework, uneven national regulation, ambiguity regarding the nature of services provided, confidentiality of contractual arrangements that hinders the attribution of legal responsibility, uncertainty over jurisdiction and accountability, and a blurred distinction between PMSCs and mercenaries.

The PMCs have been involved in the fight against drugs in LA for decades, usually under the protection of the US government. However, in recent years, governments have been turning directly to foreign private companies due to urgent security crises.[9]

This trend reflects the **privatization of security**. Due to the serious crises of security and the expansion of transnational crime, some governments see outsourced military expertise as a quick measure to fix their issues. However, experts warn this "outsourcing of public security" raises sovereignty issues and risks "fuelling, rather than containing", corruption and violence.[10]

2.1 Services portfolio

The above-mentioned research on LAC[11] says that "similarly, to mercenaries, PMSC activities can be quite elusive, as they typically do not advertise their work and are often under private contractual agreements." However, it is known that they **operate as consultants (passive role) or with operational powers (active role)**. Despite the limited systemic information on the provision of force and force-related services, it is known that PMSCs provide a variety of services and play multiple roles, including:

- training, military operational support, and logistics support to the police or armed forces

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[6] Charlotte Penel, *The Transformation of Security Institutions in Latin America: The Market for Force of Commercial Military Security Actors*, Master's thesis, University of Liverpool, 2021
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Henry Shuldiner, *Latin America: the New Mercenary Laboratory of Erik Prince*, InSight Crime, July 31, 2025.
[10] Walter Kemp and Romain Le-Cour-Grandmaison, *Guns for Hire: Should Private Military Companies Take on Organized Crime?*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, September 8, 2025.
[11] Ibid.

- supporting police through consultancy, training, logistics, and security services
- security, consultancy, and intelligence operations to extractive companies and national governments.

According to 2023 data, PMSCs mainly provide security (22.5), military operational support (22%), military training (15.9%), military logistics (12.7%), and intelligence (12.4%). To a lesser extent, they provide security logistics (5.9%), security consultancy (3%), security training, military consultancy (2.5%), and combat operations (0.3%).[12] These patterns may evolve in response to recent developments, including allegations of PMSC drone support in Haiti.

2.2 Main suppliers

In recent years, private military and security companies (PMSCs) have sought new business and opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

This is the case of **Mr. Erik Prince**, a renowned entrepreneur in the military sector and founder of the private security company Blackwater (now part of Constellis, formerly known as Academi), with decades of experience in military interventions in other regions. A media article released in 2025[13] noted Latin America as the new laboratory for Erik Prince´s work. In fact, recently, Mr. Prince has been promoting his companies in the region as a solution to insecurity and organized crime. It is known that he is operating (or is seeking to operate) in **Ecuador, Haiti, Peru,** and **El Salvador**, as detailed below.

The **Wagner Group** is another organization that has allegedly been active in **Venezuela**; however, there is debate about the actual scope of its operations. For its part, **GardaWorld Corporation** is another Canadian company that provides international protection and crisis management services in Latin America.[14]

2.3 Customers/Country cases

The aforementioned study published in 2023[15], mentions that most of the PMSCs operating in the region were hired by foreign governments (73.4%), mainly by the United States (66.2%), particularly in the context of initiatives to combat drug trafficking, such as the Merida Initiative in **Mexico** and Plan Colombia. Recently, **Ecuador, Peru, El Salvador**, and **Haiti** have been countries where PMSCs operate.

- **Ecuador:** In March 2025, during his reelection campaign, President Daniel Noboa announced a "strategic alliance"[16] with Mr. Prince to combat organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal fishing. [17] In April 2025, the Secretary of Defense announced that Prince was in the country fighting narco-terrorism.[18] In April 2025, as part of the aforementioned strategic alliance, Mr. Prince traveled to Ecuador to meet with security forces and provide advice and training in the

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[12] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[13] Henry Shuldiner, *Latin America: the New Mercenary Laboratory of Erik Prince*, InSight Crime, July 31, 2025.
[14] Oier Zeberio, *El multimillonario y sombrío negocio de las Compañías Militares Privadas*, Spanish Revolution, February 4, 2022.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Noboa Announces an Alliance with Businessman Erik Prince to Confront Narcoterrorism and Violence in Ecuador*, Infobae, March 12, 2025.
[17] Daniel Noboa Azín [@DanielNoboaOk], *Trabajamos sin descanso para cumplir con el país. ¡Lo estamos logrando!*, X (formerly Twitter), March 11, 2025.
[18] Ministerio de Defensa Nacional del Ecuador [@DefensaEc], *¡Nueva etapa histórica por la seguridad ya inició!*, X (formerly Twitter), *April 5, 2025*.

fight against criminal gangs. He even participated in a police operation in Guayaquil as part of these efforts to combat narco-terrorism.[19] It should be noted that in 2024, Ecuador had the highest homicide rate in the region (38.8%).[20]

- **Haiti:** In March 2025, the Prime Minister created a task force to counter criminal gangs, and has hired foreign private military contractors to support these operations,[21] including, reportedly, **Vectus Global** (Mr. Prince's company).[22] These foreign private military companies are equipped with high-powered weapons, helicopters, and surveillance drones to combat gangs.[23] However, security sources and local authorities have criticised the lack of coordination between the task force and the Haitian National Police. Media have reported that there are two parallel arrangements between Prince's company and the government. The first arrangement consists of a one-year contract under which personnel act as instructors and monitors while supporting combat operations, allegedly including **drone strikes and the deployment of air and maritime assets**. Since 2025, the use of explosive drones against gangs have been reported; although there is no certainty, it is presumed that these private military teams are behind these operations. A second, unconfirmed arrangement reportedly involves a 10-year agreement to restructure and modernize customs and immigration services.[24] The US State Department has denied paying Mr. Prince or his company for any work in Haiti; however, US officials said they were aware of Mr. Prince's work with the Haitian government.[25] Although some key details remain unclear, the agreement appears to involve the long-term outsourcing of state functions to private actors.[26] It should be noted that Haiti is facing overlapping security, political, economic and humanitarian crises, with powerful gangs controlling vast swaths of territory and infrastructure in the country and inflicting violence on civilians. In that context, the UN Security Council established in 2022 a sanctions regime and a territorial arms embargo, prohibiting the supply of arms and related materiel, assistance and training related to military activities, however, these measures do not apply to any UN, UN-authorised mission, or a security unit operating under the command of the Government.[27]
- **Peru:** Prince was invited to Peru by a former presidential candidate. During his visit, he publicly offered his services to train military and police forces, highlighting technological advances, such as drone use in Haiti, offer an innovative technological solution. Prince has indicated that he has already met with representatives of formal and informal mining companies, self-defense committees that "operate in the vacuum left by the state"" and announced meetings with members of the police, armed forces, intelligence services, and even representatives of the presidency during his visit to Lima.[28] It should be noted that organized crime, particularly illegal mining, and political instability are two of the main problems facing the country.

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[19] Erik Prince, Founder of the Private Security Firm Blackwater, Traveled to Ecuador to Assist the Police in Their Fight Against Criminal Gangs, Infobae, April 5, 2025.
[20] Balance de Insight Crime de los homicidios en 2024, Insight Crime, February 26, 2025.
[21] Final report of the Panel of Expert son Haiti submitted pursuant to resolution 2752 (2024), United Nations, 2025.
[22] Walter Kemp and Romain Le-Cour-Grandmaison, Guns for Hire: Should Private Military Companies Take on Organized Crime?, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, September 8, 2025.
[23] David C. Adams, Frances Robles, and Mark Mazzetti, A Desperate Haiti Turns to Erik Prince, Trump Ally, in Fight Against Gangs, The New York Times, May 28, 2025.
[24] Ibid. Global Initiative.
[25] Ibid. NY Times.
[26] Ibid. Global Initiative
[27] UN Security Council, Resolution 2794(2025).
[28] Hernando de Soto [@HDeSotoPeru], Erik Prince llegó al Perú invitado por Hernando de Soto para combatir la insegur1dad y el cr1m3n, X (formerly Twitter), Jul 21, 2025.

- **El Salvador:** In 2024, Prince visited the prison known as the Terrorist Detention Center (CECOT) and met with President Nayib Bukele.[29]

3 Mercenaries, mercenary-related actors

The Latin America and Caribbean Commercial Military Security Actors (LACCSMA) dataset developed at the University of Liverpool defines mercenaries as "individuals or groups of individuals that are not legally registered and are foreign to the country in which they operate. As such they are neither volunteers, paramilitaries, rebels, nor criminal groups." Like PMSCs, mercenaries operate for remuneration, deliver similar services, and are not integrated into the armed forces or police institutions. [30] They are often former military personnel or individuals with military training.

They were prominent actors in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) during the 1980s, participating in armed conflicts on behalf of both rebel groups and government forces. Mercenary activity has decreased in the region; however, **mercenaries continue to operate in the Andean region, Central America, and Mexico**[31] **mainly working for drug cartels by providing military training, including lethal tactics, as well as security services.** This reported decrease remains open to question, given multiple documented cases of their presence across several countries in the region.

Another media mention that mercenaries are largely concentrated in **Colombia, El Salvador, Mexico,** and **Nicaragua**, while there were only limited cases of mercenary presence in **Haiti, Peru, Suriname**, and **Venezuela**.[32]

Unlike PMSCs, which are almost always legally registered, **mercenaries are often unregistered and operate with armed opposition or criminal groups, so reliable information on their location and activities remains scarce**. However, their presence is known to be smaller than that of PMSCs. Despite the complexity of gathering information, the LACCMSA database provides important regional information, as it compiles data on events that occurred between 1980 and 2016.[33]

Estimates indicated the p**resence of approximately 12,000 mercenaries in Latin America in 2008, rising to around 2.4 million by 2018** (most of them of Colombian origin). In addition, mercenaries operating in **Mexico** and in other foreign contexts, such as **Ukraine**, reportedly receive comparatively high remuneration (e.g. around USD 2,000 per month). Such attractive salaries, particularly when contrasted with relatively low or uncompetitive government pay, serve as a key incentive for individuals to offer their services.[34] In addition to monetary incentives, some mercenaries operate based on ideological motivations, such as anti-communism or pro-communism.[35]

3.1 Roles of Mercenaries

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[29] Nayib Bukele [@nayibbukele], Erik Prince in El Salvador, X (formerly Twitter), August 17, 2024.
[30] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[31] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[32] Ibid. Charlotte Penel.
[33] Ibid. Charlotte Penel.
[34] Diego Stacey and Pablo Ferri, *Nosotros somos del Cártel Jalisco': así operan los mercenarios colombianos en México*, EL PAÍS México, June 14, 2025.
[35] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.

Mercenaries and/or mercenary-related actors bring combat experience, tactical training, and access to criminal groups, which *has helped explain the increased firepower of organized crime,* said a Mexican national security expert.[36] The infusion of professional soldiers has elevated the cartels' warfighting capabilities. Mexican gangs are now deploying advanced tactics like **drone-mounted bombs, sniper ambushes, and military-grade IEDs**[37], thanks in part to foreign specialists.

Most mercenaries are hired by criminal groups or non-state armed actors to fight in highly violent contexts. In certain cases, mercenaries are also hired by agricultural or industrial actors to deal with criminal threats. [38]

These actors have effectively become **multipliers of organized crime's power**, amplifying the violence and sophistication of criminal activities throughout the region. Their key functions include:

- Carrying out targeted killings, kidnappings, and violent acts on behalf of organized crime bosses.
- Enhancing the capabilities of criminal groups as military trainers and tactical experts. Former special forces members have been training cartel members in the use of weapons, explosives, counter-surveillance, and infantry tactics. They also introduce new techniques, such as the use of improvised mines and drones in the cartel war in Mexico.
- Advising criminal organizations.
- Participate in shootouts and armed confrontations (e.g., setting up ambushes, escorting cartel convoys).
- Facilitate logistics, such as weapons procurement, information gathering, or money laundering fronts.
- Transfer of knowledge, including technological knowledge.

Available data shows the percentage of mercenaries according to types of services: Combat operations (36.8%), Military training (36%), Military logistics (14.6%), intelligence (4.7%), military consultant (4.7%), security (2.9%), and military operational support (1.2%).[39]

3.2 Clients[40]

Clients refer to actors who sought mercenary services (ie., those who paid for them). Despite the fact that in some cases the type of client being unknown, available data indicate the following distribution of demand:

- **Non-state armed groups (63.2%)**: Primarily **drug cartels** operating in **Colombia** and **Mexico**, as well as other non-state actors engaged in **counter-insurgency efforts** in **El Salvador** and **Nicaragua** during the 1980s.
- **Political opposition and rebel groups (15.1%)**: Including the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), an insurgent movement that later became a legal political party in El Salvador, and the Contras, a guerrilla group operating in Nicaragua.

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[36] Ibid. El PAÍS
[37] Ibid. El PAÍS
[38] Ibid. El PAÍS
[39] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[40] Ibid. Charlotte Penel.

- **Foreign governments (12.3%)**: Exclusively linked to United States intervention in Nicaragua.
- **National governments (8.5%)**: Mainly in the context of the Salvadoran civil war.

3.3 Cases

- **Mexico: Cartels Recruit Foreign Mercenaries**

Cartels recruit foreign mercenaries: Mexico's powerful drug cartels, including Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Sinaloa, Los Viagras Tepalcatepec, Carteles Unidos La Familia Michoacana, and Los Caballeros Templarios[41] [42] have been involved in recruiting foreign mercenaries, especially former soldiers or **ex-military personnel from Colombia**, to act as elite hitmen, instructors, and force multipliers.[43]

Police reports indicate that Mexican cartels have been forming elite units composed of former Colombian commandos, including snipers, explosives experts, urban warfare specialists, and drone pilots. The cartels acquire highly trained fighters and internal instructors to train them [44]

In most cases, they are retired military personnel, around 40 years of age, with approximately 20 years of service, fully trained and with extensive experience in combat against irregular armed groups, such as guerrillas and drug trafficking organizations. In addition, reports indicate the involvement of younger ex-soldiers, under the age of 30, as well as former Colombian police officers, in the Mexican context.[45]

Compared to the Zetas cartel, which was founded in the 2000s by Mexican special forces who had defected, and which is known for hiring Israeli mercenaries to train its assassins in jungle survival, torture, and weaponry, the scope and scale of mercenary recruitment since 2022 appears significantly broader.[46]

- **Colombia: Broader industry of mercenaries**

Former Colombian military personnel, as well as individuals with military training from Colombia, are highly valued in the international private military contracting market due to their strong professional training.[47] As one Mexican security expert observed, "the level of training of the Colombian forces is very high".[48] By the late 2010s, investigative reports described Colombia as the "world's main exporter of mercenaries."[49]

Media reports confirm that hundreds of **former Colombian soldiers leave the country each year to participate in foreign conflicts, including the war in Ukraine,** attracted by high remuneration. Of particular concern, in July 2025, both active and former Colombian military personnel were

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[41] Diego Stacey and Pablo Ferri, *Nosotros somos del Cártel Jalisco': así operan los mercenarios colombianos en México*, EL PAÍS México, June 14, 2025.
[42] *Cárteles mexicanos reciclan a militares y exguerrilleros colombianos*, *Código 13 Parral, April 18, 2024*
[43] Ibid. El PAÍS
[44] Ibid. Código 13
[45] *Cárteles mexicanos reciclan a militares y exguerrilleros colombianos,* Código 13 Parral, 2024.
[46] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.
[47] Diego Stacey and Pablo Ferri, *Nosotros somos del Cártel Jalisco': así operan los mercenarios colombianos en México*, EL PAÍS México, June 14, 2025.
[48] Ibid. El PAÍS
[49] Samuel Losada Iriarte, *Colombia, the factory that exports mercenaries: from Mexican cartels to global wars*, Infobae, Jun 5, 2025.

arrested in Michoacán, Mexico, while working for the Los Reyes cartel, and were charged with manufacturing antipersonnel mines and possessing firearms, magazines, and ammunition.[50]

In response to these developments, President Gustavo Petro stated that "we are exporting mercenaries to the mafia."[51] **Consequently, in December 2025, the Colombian Congress approved a government-backed bill aimed at ratifying an international convention against mercenarism**, following persistent challenges linked to the recruitment of former military personnel, whose experience stems from Colombia's prolonged internal conflict.[52]

Beyond legislative action, Colombian authorities have reportedly begun to more closely monitor the outflow of former soldiers. Security institutions now face a structural dilemma: how to adequately reintegrate former personnel and prevent their recruitment into mercenary activities. With pensions reportedly as low as USD 350 per month for a retired sergeant, overseas offers exceeding USD 2,000, and up to USD 4,300 in active conflict zones such as Ukraine, remain a powerful incentive. [53]

- **Haiti: Mercenaries in Presidential Assassination**

Haiti illustrates *both sides* of mercenary involvement: **first as perpetrators of organized crime, and then as outsourced crime-fighters.**

In July 2021, at least 24 Colombian mercenaries, mostly retired military personnel, participated in the assassination of then-President of Haiti, Jovenel Moïse. The hit squad of 26 men penetrated Moïse's residence and shot him dead, in what Haitian authorities later described as a group of *"highly trained professional mercenaries"* [54]. This incident plunged Haiti deeper into chaos, facilitating gangs took territorial control of Port-au-Prince.

Many of the Colombians later claimed they were misled about the mission, they thought they were hired as private bodyguards, only to find themselves in an assassination plot[55]. Families of some mercenaries and organizations have raised concerns about inhumane detention conditions and stalled investigations. One suspect has been charged in the United States, while the others remain without legal counsel.[56]

- **Ecuador: Turning to Mercenaries to Combat Crime**

Ecuador's chaos has been exacerbated by **foreign mercenaries contracted by criminal leaders**. One of the most severe cases is the assassination of presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio in August 2023. Villavicencio, a crusader against corruption and cartels, was gunned down in Quito just days before the election. Six suspects were quickly arrested, all of them Colombian nationals. In this case, the hit squad was likely hired by an Ecuadorian crime group called 'Los Choneros', which are parter of the Cartel de Sinaloa (rival of the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación). This example highlighted how deeply **foreign contract killers** have penetrated Ecuador's underworld.

Colombian hitmen contracted in Ecuador also eliminated prosecutors, demonstrating mercenary involvement in a transnational murder-for-hire plot.

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[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] *Colombian Congress approves convention against mercenarism in rejection of recruitment of ex-military*, AP News, Dic 3, 2025.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Samuel Losada Iriarte, *Colombia, the factory that exports mercenaries: from Mexican cartels to global wars*, Infobae, Jun 5, 2025.
[55] Juan Esteban Lewin, *Six Colombians Captured for the Assassination of Fernando Villavicencio*, EL PAÍS, 2023.
[56] Catalina Oquendo, *The legal limbo of Colombian mercenaries accused of the Haitian presidential assassination*, EL PAÍS, 2022

4 International legal framework

- While international frameworks exist to guide the regulation of private security companies—most notably the Montreux Document and the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoCA), the former is not legally binding, and the latter lacks effective enforcement mechanisms. In addition, contractors do not fall under military law, and significant legal ambiguities persist regarding their rights and accountability under both international and domestic legal systems.[57]
- Ratification of the International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries (1989) remains fragmented across LAC[58], with several key States, particularly those with significant military capacities, regional influence, or links to private security markets (Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, and Chile) not being parties, which weakens a common regional normative baseline.[59]

5 Implications

Private military and security companies and mercenaries pose challenges for human rights, Legal, Political and Security Implications.

5.1 Legal Challenges

- The absence of various LAC States from the **International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries** complicates prevention, criminalization, and international cooperation efforts related to mercenarism.
- Enforcement is weak due to the narrow definition of "mercenary'" which excludes many private contractors.[60]
- The prosecution and adjudication involving PMSCs, particularly US companies, operating abroad remain challenging, as they are often subject to local legal frameworks. This poses significant difficulties in contexts where the rule of law is weak or absent. A notable example is Haiti, where foreign mercenaries involved in the assassination of the president remain in a legal limbo, marked by regulatory gaps, alleged irregularities, and limited procedural progress.[61]
- One of the biggest issues with deploying PMCs is accountability. The oversight mechanisms controlling are not clear or do not exist.[62] Private military contractors operate outside military law and often have contracts granting them immunity in host countries, complicating justice if they commit crimes.[63]
- An article published by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime highlights that the involvement of PMCs raises more questions than answers. It poses a series of critical

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[57] Walter Kemp and Romain Le-Cour-Grandmaison, *Guns for Hire: Should Private Military Companies Take on Organized Crime?*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Sep 8, 2025.
[58] Barbados, Suriname, Costa Rica, Honduras, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela.
[59] *International Convention Against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries*, United Nations Treaty Collection, 1989.
[60] Walter Kemp and Romain Le-Cour-Grandmaison, *Guns for Hire: Should Private Military Companies Take on Organized Crime?*, Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, Set 8, 2025.
[61] Catalina Oquendo, *The legal limbo of Colombian mercenaries accused of the Haitian presidential assassination*, EL PAÍS, 2022
[62] Ibid. Global Initiative
[63] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.

issues, asking: *" Who do they report to? What measures are in place to ensure accountability for potential human rights violations? Might the deployment of PMCs escalate violence rather than reduce it? Private armies can exert force, but can they deliver justice? If Prince's troops were to capture Haiti's most serious offenders, what would they do with them? Is private prosecution the next step? And should this trend be accepted as a palliative alternative to intractable, crime-fuelled violence?"*

5.2 Political/Sovereignty Issues:

- The use of mercenaries strikes at the heart of state sovereignty. Politically, heavy reliance on mercenaries can be seen as an admission of state weakness, undermining public confidence in the government and its security forces.
- Operations of foreign mercenaries can raise tension between countries. For instance, the Haitian case put Colombia in an uncomfortable spotlight internationally and strained Haiti's relations with the US.
- The idea of privatizing security or military tasks is politically contentious. On the one hand, it could be considered as a national intervention in issues reserved by the State. On the other hand, their proponents argue that they are essential in conflict settings or in areas where security is lacking and national armed forces are absent. However, experts emphasize persistent shortcomings in transparency and oversight of their activities, as well as gaps in legal accountability. These factors significantly hinder a comprehensive analysis of PMSCs and the operations they conduct. [64]
- Limited transparency raises concerns, as some agreements involving national security interests are ambiguous or not publicly disclosed, and experts have questioned the scope and allegedly broad powers granted to PMCs, which could go beyond, or even substitute, functions traditionally reserved for the State.

5.3 Human rights challenges and Security Implications:

- Several high-profile cases of mercenary activity, such as the assassination of the President of Haiti involving former Colombian soldiers, as well as the killings of judicial authorities and political leaders in Colombia, have highlighted serious **human rights abuses** and other illegal activities (torture, extrajudicial killings, excessive force, illicit use of firearms, among others). Similarly, concerns have been raised regarding potential human rights violations associated with the operations of PMCs.
- The role of PMCs on the ground is becoming increasingly important, in particular to support governments mired in security crises, while the mercenaries as led to a switch from supporting state governments and rebel groups in armed conflicts to working for drug cartels and political-criminal groups.[65] This implies a dynamic change in the field of security; mostly all these actors are armed and use technology for their activities.
- A pernicious implication is the potential corruption of security forces. The presence of private military alternatives can encourage defections and double-dipping and the line between official

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[64] Oier Zeberio, *El multimillonario y sombrío negocio de las Compañías Militares Privadas*, Spanish Revolution, February 4, 2022.

[65] Charlotte Penel, *The market for force and force-related services in Latin America and the Caribbean: The impact on human, national and regional security*, Policy Brief, Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), 2023.

forces and mercenaries can blur. For instance, Mexican reports mention that some Colombians arrested had current military credentials.

Although these actors are highly present in the LAC region, academic research and literature have largely focused on other regions. As a result, information and data on their operations in Latin America and the Caribbean remain limited. In the absence of a clear understanding of their presence and activities, assessing the consequences of this phenomenon becomes particularly challenging.[66]

In response to these challenges, calls for stronger regulation and oversight have increased. Internationally, experts urge updated legal frameworks to regulate private military actors and ensure accountability for those who employ them. Regionally, bodies such as the OAS are exploring monitoring mechanisms, while some States, illustrated by the Colombian case, are considering stronger vetting, licensing, and reintegration measures to reduce incentives for illicit activity.

6 Recommendations

6.1 Encourage States to integrate violence prevention efforts (including armed violence prevention) into national security strategies and vice versa, aimed at reducing mercenary recruitment.

6.2 Establish regional reporting / oversight mechanism to systematically track incidents involving mercenaries and PMSCs in the LAC region, including arms and drones use and human rights violations.

6.3 Urge States to maintain inherent governmental functions, including use of force, arrests, detention, intelligence collection, and border control.

6.4 Urge States to criminalize recruitment for, or provision of services to, foreign criminal groups, including drug cartels, and strengthen cross-border investigative cooperation.

6.5 Promote greater transparency and legality and enhance accountability in operations and activities of mercenaries, mercenary-related actors and private military and security companies.

Weapon-specific recommendations

6.6 Call on States to develop or update national legislation regulating PMSCs, including clear licensing systems, disclosure obligations, arms-carrying authorizations, and operational restrictions.

6.7 Urge States to strictly regulate and publicly report on firearm licenses granted to PMSCs, including types, quantities, calibers, and storage procedures.

6.8 Recommend States to strictly regulate / ban PMSCs and foreign actors from possessing or deploying military-grade weapons, such as assault rifles, sniper systems, explosives, and armed drones, unless explicitly authorized under stringent state control.

6.9 Mandatory transparency for all PMSC contracts, especially those involving use of force, access to weapons, or involvement in anti-crime operations.

6.10 Encourage LAC States to fully implement and enforce the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), the Firearms Protocol, the UN PoA and regional instruments, including Firearms Roadmaps, to prevent diversion of weapons to mercenary-linked criminal groups.

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[66] Charlotte Penel *The Transformation of Security Institutions in Latin America: The Market for Force of Commercial Military Security Actors*, Master's thesis, University of Liverpool, 2021

6.11 Recommend the systematic marking, tracing, and record-keeping for weapons used by PMSCs and private actors, ensuring traceability in cases of human rights abuses.

6.12 Encourage States to rebalance excessive military expenditures, including on spending directed toward private military actors, offensive weapon systems, and militarized responses to crime and reallocating resources toward Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation. [67]

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Drafted by Eliana Carbajal Lovaton

[67] https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/the-true-cost-of-peace