

GLOBAL SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES: MAPPING THE FIELD

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Abstract

Global security assemblages' concept, in a decade of its existence, has been a useful tool to explain a lot of atypical security collaboration between private and public entities. It has greatly improved understanding of collaboration between public and private security forces, which, until then, mostly has been seen through the civil-military paradigm. Through the expansion of scenarios where private security forces have been observed (to include environments not considered either at war or in peace, but somewhere in between) global security assemblages demonstrated, on numerous occasions, examples that cooperation between private and public forces may contribute to the improvement of the global security environment.

Hence, how far can we stretch this concept? Private entities operate at numerous places and contexts and the concept may be a limited tool to understand their input in achieving a more stable environment. It has been set to apply in peaceful settings, but would it be possible to extend its application in unstable environments, within unpredictable security settings? This paper looks at how the concept has been used and applied so far, the scope where it can and has been applied, and draw the limitations to its use.

Keywords

Global security assemblages; private security; conflict; civil-military relations; public-private relations

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GLOBAL SECURITY ASSEMBLAGES: MAPPING THE FIELD ¹

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Global security assemblages' concept arose as a response to the long quest for a suitable framework under which cooperation and dynamics between private and public actors providing security can be studied. Strong reintroduction of use of private security in mainstream policies by states since the beginning of the century, aside from their ever-growing use by the private sector, caused serious difficulties in studying dynamics between new actors and their interactions with state forces and/or institutions. The first wave of literature sought historical references on how to address these new actors, and found fertile ground in comparison to mercenaries, after some of the more serious incidents caused by those forces under government contracts (Fidler, 2007; Pelton, 2007; Singer, 2004). The mostly unknown mode (to the general public) in which they are employed, rules of their engagement, and limited institutional and legal frameworks under which these new actors would be categorized, caused hitches in their better understanding (Silverstein, 1997; Brooks, 2000; Singer, 2003; Kinsey, 2005; Krahmman, 2005a). The misunderstanding of the evolution of the private security industry - and the perception by the general public that they are mercenaries - was the principal challenge faced in the early years. On the one hand, Silverstein (1997), Brooks (2000) and Singer (2003) contributed by shedding a light on the industry and the new contexts within which they are employed. On the other hand, Kinsey (2005) and Krahmman (2005a) highlighted the inadequate legal framework to deal with the private security industry, instead of mercenaries.

Security governance literature has addressed aspects of the inclusion of non-state actors (and particularly private security companies) in the institutional framework (Bryden & Caparini, 2006; Bures & Carrapico, 2017; Krahmman, 2010). However, few options were available to observe everyday dynamics between state and private security actors. Certainly, the most problematic issue for academics was the approach used to accomplish it; namely, after the expansion of the use of private security to stability operations and post-conflict setting. Avant (2004, 2005) addressed the power exchange issue by looking at how effectively on the ground and in the decision-making process power related to security decisions previously monopolized by states has been influenced by the private security companies working for them. She acknowledged difficulties in applying any IR approaches to issues associated with private security companies, since those actors and interactions represent new realities that we have not seen before (Avant, 2006). Another commonly used approach to address cooperation between private security forces and state institutions is through civil-military relations/cooperation. From looking how these

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work together on the ground and problems they face from diverse cultures they have (Bruneau, 2011; Herbst, 2007; Holmqvist, 2005), to observing it as a governance matter (Krahmann, 2005b), to seeking answers within network theories (Avant, 2016; Krahmann, 2016), academics have struggled to apply knowledge from the ground to existent frameworks.

In such settings, there was a need for another approach that would facilitate the study of not only the military outsourced security (by some states), but also to expand analysis on commercial security services provided globally that linked state institutions and private actors. In 2009, Abrahamsen and Williams proposed a new tool to study the impact of and relations between private security companies and state actors, related to commercial use of security. Global security assemblages proposed to look at how, in practice, private security companies may affect security settings on the ground. The greatest innovation was the possibility to observe dynamics closely between private and public actors and to focus on the empirical data.

A decade has passed since its first introduction and here the focus is given to the utility of this concept so far. The contribution I seek to make is to present a balanced overview of the last decade, examining this concept through a literature review focusing on how the realities have become ever more complex and are not explicable by utilizing other approaches, such as security governance of actor-network theories. I shall attempt to demonstrate that it has gained ground on its own merit, although it has served as an inspiration to other concepts that have derived from it. Finally, this paper will explore the challenges that the global security assemblages concept is now facing with the growing complexity of security environments, namely the analysis of the inclusion of new actors like terrorists, rebels and various criminal groups.

To accomplish it, I address where this concept has been applied so far and with what purpose. Then I draw on its limitations that have been recognized and question its relevance a decade after being introduced. I make a critical analysis of the most important literature published in a decade of its existence and I seek to include the wide range of issues that have been explored. The article is divided into four parts, as follows: In continuation, I address the concept itself and explain its main features and aims. Then, I look at where geographically, thematically, and by which disciplines it has been used so far. Then, I draw the limitations of the concept. Finally, I conclude that even though there are a lot of benefits in using this approach, there are certain restrictions as well, and recommend new research areas.

Global security assemblages concept - what it is and why we are using it?

The concept of assemblages is not new and has been used in various disciplines through previous decades. Originally, concept and theory of assemblages were introduced by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and, after them, it has been widely used and developed within sociology and political science. Deleuze's contributions to assemblage thinking have been widely accepted, but it's rudimentary and rather scattered thoughts rather than articulated theory have been recognized as well (DeLanda, 2006, p. 3). Deleuze and Guattari established the concept of assemblages, still primordial in articulation but containing three essential elements: abstract machine, concrete element, and personae. As Nail (2017: 23-24) stressed, for Deleuze and



Guattari assemblages are like abstract machines as they a) do not exist as a thing/object in the world but are rather a set of external relations that surround elements and agencies, and b) are networks of specific external relations defined by composition, mixture, and aggregation. Assemblages also need to have a concrete element, an existing embodiment of assemblages, as a skeletal frame or archipelago (Nail, 2017: 26). Finally, the personae of the assemblages are agents that cannot be observed and studied independently, as they are mobile operators that connect concrete elements together according to their abstract relations. Deleuze and Guattari give examples of a runner or an intercessor, stating that "persona is needed to relate concepts on the plane, just as the plane itself needs to be laid out" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1996: 73–76).

In 2006, DeLanda presented what he considered to be an improved version of assemblage theory, which he considered to be version 2.0 of Deleuze's or, as he called it, "neo-assemblage theory" (DeLanda, 2006: 4). His drive was to set assemblages theory free of the micro-macro divide and to allow a cross-level analysis of sociological entities and processes. The difference from the isolated concepts mentioned by Deleuze is in collecting certain elements of assemblage thinking and making analytical sense of them. For instance, he departed from Deleuze and Guattari's social ontology (individuals, groups and the social field), which he considered to be primitive, and extended it to international organizations and interpersonal networks. Also, he advances further by showing that assemblages must be fully "independent from our minds", calling on them to be autonomous, mind-independent agents. He departed from the recognition that exteriority of relations is an important assumption of assemblages. That implies assemblages are not firm and static formation; they may be separated in functional parts that interact with the other actors, but still, when they interact among themselves, their interactions may result in synthesis (DeLanda, 2006: 11). Moreover, he analyzes binomial relations between territorialization and deterritorialization and uses *coding* to analyze each element of interaction among those parts that form assemblage. DeLanda dedicated every chapter to a different kind of assemblage, to express the range of forms they may take: social (chapter 1), linguistic (chapter 2), martial (chapter 3), scientific practices (chapter 4), a diagrammatic of the actual and virtual (chapter 5), atomic, genetic and chemical (chapter 6) and scientific and mathematical solutions (chapter 7).

Through time, academics have been leaving their own mark on the concept of assemblages by extending its use and proposing new directions. The main advance from DeLanda's theorization is the assumption that assemblages should not be limited to theory, but rather considered as a way of thinking. As Acuto and Curtis (2014: 3) explained, applying a thinking tool to assemblages is "a feature that makes this approach less of a theory and more of a repository of methods and ontological stances towards the social". Others have begun introducing new aspects and theories to supplement assemblages thinking: Legg (2011) in conjunction with Foucault, Haraway with a feminist approach (Feigenbaum, 2015), and McCann and Ward (2012) with an application to study of policy. Even though each application has its own idiosyncrasies, assemblages thinking would have some core characteristics, like embracement of multiplicity, focus on practices of relation and ordering, a mixture of material and symbolic expressivity, and simultaneity of territorialization and de-territorialization (Bureš, 2015^a: 17–18). Other common characteristics of all assemblage thinking are methods applied to accomplish it: ethnography, interviews, participant observation, and discourse analysis (Lisle, 2014: 70).



Global security assemblages is a concept drawn by Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams (2009b) with an aim to provide a framework to learn from the practices the impact private security companies have on security context where they operate. They departed from the Sassen (2008) notion of state disassembly that assumed reconfiguration of the state as we knew it before, in the western style democracies, and integration of non-state actors as active participants. The contribution of Sassen is not solely a recognition of the existence of non-state actors, as this had previously been done decades ago; however, she is the first to explain that the system founded on traditional agents needs to be disassembled and reassembled to bring in non-state actors as equal and active participants in governance structures. From there, Abrahamsen and Williams proposed a reassembly of how the security provision is perceived nowadays and include private security providers as an integral part of it.

Such an approach brought into the center of analysis, when it comes to private security, an important element that previously has been left aside: ethnography. Not limiting the descriptive nature of the ethnographic method, but using it as a departing point of analysis, global security assemblages' concept focuses on the integration of data collected from practices and its interpretation through two important – and up to then separate – paradigms: private/public and local/global. By using Bourdieu's concept of *field*², Abrahamsen and Williams (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010) work on reassembly of our perceptions of where the public sphere terminates and where the private begins. They used the concept as an analytical liberation from heavy theoretical constraints and assume that the concept is constructive and deeply interconnected with empirical findings (2014a: 27). It steps up from the linear understanding of the place and role of actors involved in the informal security governance (setup) in certain places, as in Africa, where western conceptualization of how things occur is not applicable (Abrahamsen, 2017). They made a huge step by setting aside, up to then, used network theories to explain how security actors cooperate and work at the same place. Their conceptual set up is leaning on Bourdieu's concepts of capital and power, allowed both solidification of theoretical ground and setting some conceptual boundaries, and in the same time openness to adapt it to be applicable in the realities that are not western democracies. Even though they admit slippages between Bourdieu's field theory and assemblages, it is clear that Bourdieu's field theory is not applicable in its entirety here (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2014b: 27). Concept of field simply is not extendable to a global scale and, therefore, significant adjustments were necessary. However, it permitted freedom to set non-linear, non-network sets of actors, and to admit transformational nature and characteristics when it comes to the power they hold and capital they have.

The reassembly of our security perception extends to a distinction between a local and global, and public and private, and the crucial point is that the traditional western-centric definition of the state and institutions run by it have a very different version in the non-western world; and those concepts will not do justice to analysis that is done, simply because they are not reflecting requirements that those concepts hold in western

² The field represents a social space that goes beyond locating objects of analysis within historical, spatial (local, national, international), and relational context, and includes comprehension of how previous knowledge was generated, by whom, and whose interests were served by those practices (Bourdieu, 2000a, 2000b). The analogy sometimes is given to a certain sports game field: they are shaped according to the game that is played; it has its own rules, its own star players, histories, legends, and lore (Thompson, 2014: 67). Agents do share more than one field simultaneously, varying in generality and scope, and include both professional and private spheres of life.



tradition (Abrahamsen, 2017). Their examples through Africa demonstrate blurring lines among benefits in security, considering the action of private companies and “public” forces (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010). The same way, those public entities are considered local, but with input and cooperation with global security companies, the security outputs may not be constricted on the action of either separately (Williams, 2016).

Where and how it has been employed so far?

This approach has been embraced by the academic community globally as it opened up a space for a study of the commercial private security companies beyond conflict zones, still in a context of public-private security provision and use as military support. Private companies and NGOs globally have been using private security companies to secure their operations and assets in remote and challenging environments (Avant, 2007: 457; Omeje, 2017). The mining and gas exploration companies have been heavily using these agents since the early 1990s and their use has exponentially grown (Börzel & Hönke, 2010; Ferguson, 2005; Kirshner & Power, 2015). The most notable outcome was an acknowledgment that private security providers have caused some positive impact in the communities where they conduct their operations. They introduced higher operational standards, approximated human rights respect in local communities, and overall increased the perception by the local population of a more secure environment (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007; Campbell, 2006). This was accomplished, for instance, by providing training to local security groups (either formal or informal), transcending the security efforts to the local community (from solely on the grounds of the contracting company) or offering workshops to the local population on conflict resolution techniques. The main benefit has been the ability to look at the everyday practices and dynamics that occur between private security providers and state forces. Such benefit may be seen in the research both in developing and developed countries, even though the concept was set having in mind countries where western concepts were not fully applicable. As Abrahamsen and Williams (2014a) explained, the western concepts and attempts to apply them to underdeveloped settings have severely failed. Global security assemblages allowed the perception of how the security sector is established and running in Africa. In a sense, they opened up vocabulary and offered tools for western society to research and get a grasp of workings of the security sector in Africa.

To follow the geographical focused on Africa used by Abrahamsen and Williams, the concept was also used to demonstrate practices in Tanzania (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2017), Liberia (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009a; Mohlin, 2017), Somalia (Cunha, 2017; Reno, 2017; Sandor, 2016), Democratic Republic of Congo (Schouten, 2011, 2017), Nigeria, and South Africa (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2010). Those works delved deeply into how these interactions between private security companies and non-state local agents serve as a substitute/supplement for public service and how they effectively contribute to the improvement of the local security environment.

Besides across Africa, the concept has been used to study the Middle East and Europe as well. For instance, Tholens (2017) approached how global security assemblages have been constituted in the post-2011 the Middle East. And, Hazbun (2016) looked at the Lebanese reality and used it to contextualize the state of the security sector in this country. In the European settings, Bures (2015a) used it to dismantle and reassemble



operations of the private security industry in the Czech Republic. He analyzed various assemblages – private and public, and all in between – and shed light on the complex world of the private security industry in a social context within one country. More recently, Borrajo Valiña (2018) explored emergence of the European Union comprehensive approach, based on global security assemblages, to address recent external conflicts and crisis. Before them, Berndtsson and Stern (2011) applied it in analysis of the operations of Stockholm airport security. Van Steden and De Waard (2013) applied it to what they called McDonaldization of private security industry across Europe, where commercial private security with neoliberal doctrine has been expanded to cover the areas that state would not.

With regards to the sectorial approach, in addition to being used as it was originally intended and imagined within the 'Peace' and 'Conflict' audience – to explain the dynamics between untraditional private-public and local-global actors in the developing world – several other approaches and disciplines have also found this concept to be useful. The range goes from the feminist perspective, over sociology, to criminology. For instance, in the feminist perspective, research looked at how global security assemblages affect contractors' households (Chisholm & Eichler, 2018) and how gender is affected by private security in global politics (Eichler, 2015). Within the sociology approach, Bongiovi (2016) used global security assemblages to demonstrate the setup and operations of the 2012 Olympic Games in London. In criminology, it has been used to explore various aspects of policing (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007; Albrecht, 2017; Diphorn, 2015).

The range of issues that are explored by this approach is wide: from looking over border control and protection of drug trafficking (Sandor, 2016), to its application to extractive industries (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2017), to its significance to larger security governance around the globe (Bureš, 2015b; Cunha, 2017; Hazbun, 2016; Hönke & Müller, 2012) or policing (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007; Albrecht, 2017; Diphorn, 2015), and it will be certainly expanded further.

Moreover, Abrahamsen and Williams's concept served as an inspiration for others who adjusted it and used it in their own research within the field of security governance and beyond. Within security governance research – while Abrahamsen and Williams established the global security concept as a tool to distance from agent-network theories – it is interesting to watch how Schouten (2014) departs from it to look at global security assemblages' broader impacts on security governance and suggests that the agent-network theory widens the scope of what security assemblages are. Within security studies, Collier (2018) departed from the philosophy behind the concept and adjusted it to address cybersecurity reality. Mary Kaldor (2018) took a more sociological turn and used it as a departure for establishing the global security culture concept.

As we could see, this concept is transversal from the point of view of disciplines, geographical areas, and topics where it has been useful and applied. From IR, sociology, and criminology; to overlooking Africa, Middle East and Europe; to security governance, policing, border control, and extractive industry, the scope of the concept is wide. We could also see that it has inspired others to adapt it and apply the same philosophy to other areas, as in the case of cybersecurity and security cultures.

However, when working with this concept, academics recognized some constraints and limitations to apply the concept, particularly when trying to expand on the areas that are not security stable.



Limitations and constraints of the concept

The last decade demonstrated that there was a dire need for a concept that will allow looking at dynamics between private and public forces beyond beholding over power relations but at how they impact security environments on the ground. It brought significant empirical data to the surface and produced practical knowledge about how those assemblages work in various points of the globe. However, some constraints of the concept, as proposed by Abrahamsen and Williams, are becoming more visible. The use of the concept has been stretched to accommodate diverse scenarios worldwide, as we previously saw. The fact is that the world is more complex than it was a decade ago when the concept was introduced. Those complexities, because of the concepts of global security assemblages, are now more visible than they used to be. While before there was more accent on public-private and global-local divisions, this concept allowed observing everyday practices that show blurred lines between them. That permitted seeing more in detail actors involved in assuring security in local communities, for example the local private security group Sungusungu in Sierra Leone, which assumed responsibility for the resolution of over 90% of local disputes because their coverage of local areas is much greater than that of the public forces (Albrecht, 2017). Also, it exposed an increasing range of actors to be considered in such assemblages, as well as complex circumstances where there are actors in the same space providing different dynamics at different times, as was the case of the rebel group in Kenya that originally contributed to making the environment more volatile, but then turned into a legitimate political force who eventually contributed to the stabilization and expanding of the security situation (Rasmussen, 2017).

Nowadays, there are many scenarios where we cannot make a simple distinction between the commercial use of private security and military use, as a decade ago it was. In that sense, even though Abrahamsen and Williams (2014b, p. 26) claim the concept to be more of a descriptive term than it carries on theoretical baggage, it crosses with many challenges to apply in more complex settings, where security may be evaluated to be between war and peace. As the departing assumption of the concept is that public and private local and global actors do work together (intentionally and coordinated, or not) with an aim to accomplish more stable security environment, particularly in the challenging place like many given examples across Africa. Hence, there are other actors (global, local, public, and private) who might not work in such linear mode, who might gain more from destabilization of the region that contributing to its stabilization.

That is the situation that Didier Bigo (2014: 208) identified as “messiness of the world” and called on impossibilities to establish clear and absolute boundaries. He insists on the claim that divisions as war and crime, violence, and security not only are not helpful for the understanding of the current practices that occur around the globe, but they are, in fact, harmful. Division of the agents and their role to a certain scenario, i.e., the police is dealing with internal treats vs army that deals with threats across the border are refuted by practices as invalid. Moreover, the gains and risk that certain agents represent in the broader understanding of security in certain regions may be misleading if the risk assessment does not include crime and corruption as well. While Abrahamsen and Williams looked exactly in overcoming some divisions (public-private and global-local),



their focus was on how those dynamics work with the final aim to see benefits for a local security context.

In a line with Bigo's concerns, Doucet (2016) recognizes the merits of the global security concept but demonstrates that such a concept is limited in the analysis of more complex realities, such as modern-day interventions. Because of the multiplication of the agents (both commercial and military use) involved and trying to use the concept in the areas where stability is still volatile (as post-conflict or stability operations), the concept has been stretched to its limits. It was not drawn to cover those circumstances, yet its core philosophy would be adequate for thinking about how those assemblages do work.

Even when considering somewhat stable environments, there are new hybrid forms of assemblages that go beyond private companies and public institutions and call on the importance of traditional leaders or locally organized security groups, considered non-state actors, as the crucial part of the local security dynamics in the developing world. Peter Albrecht (2017) demonstrated the weight such non-state actors carried in the Sierra Leone where the private security actor Sungusungu assumed informal responsibility for the resolution of community conflicts where there was an absence of public forces. Those actors, by being involved in such hybrid assemblages, may gain the political significance they previously did not possess, as happened in Kenya where the rebel group evolved into a legitimate political force (Rasmussen, 2017).

There is a growing literature on the other actors – such as terrorists, rebels, warlords, and other criminal groups – that turn security analysis even more complex (Varin & Abubakar, 2017). The exclusion of the terror-crime nexus when analyzing security assemblage at certain locations can cause significant alteration of the results and limit understanding of dynamics and actors relevant in certain security contexts. For instance, Frowd and Sandor (2018) demonstrated this to be relevant in the Sahel case, but certainly, this is applicable in many others. As mentioned above, expansion of what is considered a relevant private actor (i.e., commercial private security company) a decade ago, is much wider now when there are, besides local groups and traditional leaders, also other groups that contribute – positively and/or negatively – to the security environment locally. There are global actors, such as radicalized and extremist groups that contribute to alterations in security dynamics in certain regions that cannot/should not be dismissed. Difficulties to include such groups within analysis provided by global security assemblages is noticed (Ismail, 2013).

Finally, the difficulty of the global security assemblages' concept is in considering all these dynamics and acknowledging the complexity of the input of various actors involved. Some of those actors may contribute positively at one time, while negatively at other. Also, there may exist a number of positive and negative inputs at the same time that would not necessarily result in a stable local security environment.

Conclusions

This article presented a literature review of a global security concept. After explaining its origins and aims, it explored its space within various disciplines, from political science, over sociology, to criminology. The use of the concept has been diverse, both from the point of the view of the topics and geographically. It has been employed to address issues



so distinct as policing, border control, extractive industry, gender roles, and security governance. Geographically, it covered Africa, Europe, and the Middle East.

We presented the benefits of using this approach as an alternative to actor-network theories and security governance approaches that have dominated academic literature concerning the analysis of private security actors. It provided the openness to study dynamics of private and public actors and their practices, to learn from empirical data, and to go beyond power relations analysis and set aside private-public and global-local divisions, just some to name. In a decade of its use, it is a valuable tool academics use to think about relations of private security at places that defy previously established concepts and dichotomies.

The concept as a thinking tool has been useful as an inspiration to others to set their own adaptations, like Kaldor's global security cultures or Collier's global cyber security assemblages.

Hence, there are some challenges it has come across, as every growing complexity of actors, dynamics, and settings in which we can observe security assemblages, such as more hybrid forms, which include other non-state actors, the change of dynamics within and between them, as well as more volatile settings are just some of them. Those challenges represent a window of opportunity to explore further options as an inspiration to others to look at it as a departing thinking tool to form perhaps the possibility to study those adding complexities in the future.

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