

Tip-Sheets for Reporting on Security Providers

7. Armed Forces

Key definitions: who are the armed forces and what makes them different from other security providers?

The “armed forces” is a collective term that refers to all the military institutions within a state that serve the purpose of self-defense. This commonly includes the army, navy, and air force, but may also include marines specialized in land-sea combat (amphibious forces), national or republican guards responsible for territorial defense or protection of the government officials, and law enforcement agencies with military status or duties, such as gendarmerie, constabularies or coast guards. Each military force is specialized in a particular kind of mission, such as land or territorial combat, air defense, fighting on water, and in some countries online or cyber warfare capabilities are being developed. What military organizations have in common is a commitment to military discipline, which means total obedience to a strict hierarchy or chain of command: the military is the only profession where a superior can order a person to endanger themselves in the course of their regular work. Militaries depend on creating a strong sense of identity among service members and creating a certain distance from civilian life and culture in order to strengthen this sense of identity and commitment. This same sense of identity can develop into institutional cultures that become abusive or detached from broader societal and national values.

Key issues for reporting on the armed forces

Who is in control? In a democracy, legitimate civilian representatives are responsible for deciding the security and defense priorities of the nation, while professionals in the armed forces and the rest of the security sector are responsible for implementing those wishes. This division of labor is known as “democratic civilian control”. Democratic civilian control can fail in several ways. In the most extreme examples, the armed forces intervene in politics and take over government by force. Even when the military does not take over government, democratic civilian control can still be endangered if any element of the security sector refuses to submit to the authority of the civilian government, tries to influence security policy in an inappropriate way, or competes with civilian oversight and management authorities for control over key decisions affecting the armed forces. Efforts by the security sector to limit democratic oversight and management are also a challenge to democratic civilian control. Cooperation and mutual respect for professional competence between civilian and military personnel is a hallmark of sound democratic civilian control.

→ **Journalists can ask:**

- ✓ How is the status of the military defined in national law and what is their relationship to civilian authority?
- ✓ How do the armed forces interact with civilian authorities?
- ✓ What do expert opinions from civilian oversight authorities, parliaments, and civil society say about the quality of civilian control?
- ✓ Where are the key policy decisions made?
- ✓ Are certain subjects avoided for fear of provoking negative responses from the military?

- ✓ Does senior leadership within the armed forces demonstrate respect for civilian authority and democratic process? (e.g., in public statements, or with respect to historical events or significant decisions that might have affected civil-military relations)
- ✓ Is the civilian Ministry or Department of Defense well-resourced and staffed with competent civilian personnel as well as military advisors?

Appropriate roles and missions? Defining the roles and missions of the armed forces is important to delegitimize military interference in politics but also to prevent confusion between the responsibilities of the armed forces and other security forces. Legitimate missions for the armed forces usually include defense of the national territory and sovereignty and tend to be focused on external threats, but armed forces may also have a role to play assisting in civil emergencies such as search and rescue, humanitarian relief, natural disasters, or backing up internal security forces when they face security threats beyond their capabilities (e.g. the police are often ill-equipped to respond to internal armed insurgencies or in some cases even gangs). When armed forces are deployed domestically, legislation should define clearly who is responsible for their command, under what circumstances they may be deployment, and what specific authorizations are required. In most cases, command over military forces would become the responsibility of the domestic authority normally responsible for civil emergency response or law enforcement.

→ **Journalists can ask:**

- ✓ Are the primary roles and missions for the armed forces defined clearly or is there room for interpretation?
- ✓ Are internal security roles defined clearly, together with circumstances, permissions and command structures for such deployments?
- ✓ What provisions are in place to protect human rights and ensure respect for rule of law during military operations and how are these overseen?
- ✓ Are there overlaps or duplications between the armed forces and other security sector institutions?
- ✓ What problems may stem from confused relationships between border authorities and domestic law enforcement? (See tip-sheets on police and border guards)
- ✓ What recourse is available for complaints (either by service personnel or members of the public) in the event of inappropriate behaviour by members of the armed forces?
- ✓ What experiences have the armed forces had in external and/or internal deployments?
- ✓ How does the public view the roles and missions of the armed forces and how might they respond to deployments?
- ✓ What do expert opinions from across government and civil society make of the roles and missions of the armed forces?

Effective training and the right equipment? Effective military forces depend on training and appropriate equipment to create a sound basis for service. All recruits go through general training for the military branch in which they will serve, and many will go on to specialize in certain functions, such as medical training, engineering, logistics, clerical duties, or special combat. Defects in the systems that provide training and equipment undermine performance and morale by putting service personnel into situations for which they may be ill-informed, ill-equipped or ill-prepared. These situations can lead to abuse of authority by military personnel including serious human rights abuses. It is the responsibility of civilian defense management authorities to ensure that military services have the resources they need to prepare adequately for the missions they have been assigned, and a system must also be in place to make sure resources provided are well used.

Box 17 Practical example: “Abuses by Nigeria’s military found to be rampant in war against Boko Haram”

In 2015 the New York Times reported on accusations of extrajudicial killings and grave human rights abuses by the Nigerian military as it waged a campaign against Boko Haram in the north of the country. The source of the accusations at the center of the story was an Amnesty International report and the article covered both the details of the accusations (which were not new) and the evidence on which the NGO based its claims. The story also covered the reaction of the government to past accusations as well as the new report, and the response from the Nigerian Ministry of Defence. This story is an example of reporting that presents details on the problematic performance and human rights record of the military in an internal security mission. It shows how a politically sensitive but important issue can be covered in a balanced way by providing context and multiple points of view drawn from a variety of sources, including civil society, defense officials and political leaders. It also shows how reporting can both inform the public of credible accusation of grave abuses and contribute to public calls for greater accountability of the military as they fulfil their mission.

Source: Adam Nossiter, “Abuses by Nigeria’s Military Found to Be Rampant in War Against Boko Haram”, June 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/world/africa/abuses-nigeria-military-boko-haram-war-report.html>

→ Journalists can ask:

- ✓ How well have service members been prepared and equipped for the missions they are asked to face?
- ✓ How is morale affected by their preparation? (e.g., are there problems with desertion as a result?)
- ✓ Is the curriculum used for training up to date and up to task? (e.g., has training been adapted to reflect changes in mission, new equipment acquisition, use of technology, and or new conditions in the field?)
- ✓ How are conditions for new recruits at military academies?
- ✓ Are personnel continually trained throughout their career?
- ✓ Is there equal access to training opportunities for personnel of all genders?
- ✓ Does training provide exposure to human rights and international humanitarian law curricula?

Box 18 Practical example: “Mali’s ill-equipped army in spotlight after coup”

The August 2020 coup in Mali by army officers brought to the forefront the need for institutional and political reforms and the fight against insecurity and impunity, and put the spotlight on conditions inside the armed forces. An AFP story reported on difficult conditions for service personnel within the military, including poor organization, lack of equipment, dangerous terms of service and poor basic conditions (for example, a lack of water in military camps). The story covers the army’s failure to perform effectively, its inappropriate mission, and accusations of corruption. It includes points of view directly from service personnel given on condition of anonymity: ‘A soldier from an elite unit, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, recalled a deadly ambush in the country’s center in September which killed four of his comrades when armed men on motorbikes attacked their convoy. “After that I wanted to quit the army,” he said. “But I’m still here, because there is no work. What else can I do?”. This story is an example of reporting that explains how training and equipment failures can make it impossible for the armed forces to complete an essential mission, and how these failures can ultimately undermine democratic control with dramatic results.

Source: “Mali’s ill-equipped army in spotlight after coup”, September 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200906-mali-s-ill-equipped-army-in-spotlight-after-coup>



Police intervention in Schools about health measures during Covid-19 pandemic, Palestine. DCAF, Palestine, 2020.