



RESEARCH BRIEF 11/2023

Security Institute for Governance and Leadership in Africa

[SIGLA @ Stellenbosch](#)

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Perspectives on the growing military footprint on South Africa's domestic security scene¹

Background

Soldiers operating domestically within civil society is generally deemed a practice to avoid or toned down to the minimum, especially in democracies. As a general rule domestic security is reserved for the national police and their supporting agencies to bring about and maintain internal safety and security through policing functions embedded in the rule of law. If domestic security governance cannot be guaranteed through national policing agencies, one option is to invoke military support to the police and to assist with domestic security provision.² The gold standard remains that military deployments internally must be limited in terms of scope and time.

Setting the scene

The 2021 Human Sciences Research Council publication on the State of the Nation³ outlines the realities of vulnerable South African communities in need of caring and empathy from government in the extension of governance and services to society. The report sketches out the insecurity facing large sections of society that makes them particularly vulnerable to overreach and excesses. Against this backdrop, policing service delivery is becoming problematic with an apparent tendency for more military involvement and weakly regulated security actors entering the fold.

Internal military deployments are a growing feature of policing the country's domestic security landscape, both in terms of their scope and duration. Two developments help to explain this phenomenon. First, the declining capacity of the South African Police Service (SAPS) to mobilise resources efficiently and to optimise cooperation with other departments towards quality policing

¹ This brief is the first in a series on the domestic use of armed forces, political and military oversight, and the responsibility to protect.

² Schnabel, A., & Krupanski, M. (2013). Evolving internal roles of the armed forces: Lessons for building partner capacity. *SSR Paper: 7*.

³ Bohler-Muller, N., Reddy, V. & Soudien, C. 2021. An ethico-political approach to poverty and inequality: Embodying care and corporeal citizenship, in Bohler-Muller, N., Soudien, C. & Reddy, V. (eds.). *Ethics, politics, inequality: New directions – State of the nation*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

service delivery. Second, a perceivable shift in political views of defence roles that tend to increasingly lean towards domestic deployments.

Viewing the norm: Police service delivery to the South African society

The SAPS suffers from a persistent decline in public perceptions of its image as the domestic guarantee of safety and security.⁴ This perception is further accentuated by a visible decline in trust by the public in the police, as confirmed by the Minister of Police in his [2022 Budget Vote speech](#). In addition, the transition to a community-based policing culture is not progressing well while the reinforcement of policing actions with quality intelligence products leaves much to desire. One outcome is that policing functions are increasingly being usurped by a growing number of sub-national quasi-entities, generally referred to as special constables or wardens, and the private security sector. This ‘fragmentation’ of police service delivery is symbolic of a national police service relying heavily on [more ‘constables’](#) as a way out of the conundrum amidst persistent infighting in senior management reaching into the office of the Minister.

Two indicators of the instability ripples from polemics at the senior management level are the scathing 2018 report on the Marikana shootings⁵ followed by the [reporting](#) on the July 2021 riots in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng that were particularly critical of senior police leadership. These developments underline the stumbling blocks in delivering high-quality policing services and management direction and oversight. Furthermore, despite what appears to be fair timelines for corrective action, decision-makers at political and service levels appear not to respond timely and efficiently. One troubling outcome is the apparent drive for more militarised public policing capabilities⁶ over the norm of softer community policing that is more suited for South Africa’s vulnerable society.

Addressing the void: Soldiers augmenting fractured police service delivery

One outcome of the fragmented policing landscape in South Africa is a growing military presence. Five aspects are relevant to this trend. First, the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) tends to enjoy much better public perceptions than the police.⁷ Second, persistent calls for SANDF interventions are growing to help with policing of criminality, gang warfare, illegal mining syndicates, torching and destruction of trucking services, alleged sabotage at Eskom power plants and even cash-in-transit heist waves. Third, by law, the police can request the SANDF for assistance and the president can authorise this. Fourth, domestic use of the SANDF is circumscribed by law in order to guard against the entrapments of the militarisation of society but plays out amidst a more receptive defence leadership. Finally, bringing in the military is a phenomenon to be carefully guarded, specifically through parliamentary oversight and the functions of the Military Ombud.

Warning lights on the domestic use of soldiers to assist and even step into policing roles and functions in South Africa have emerged. First, an ongoing pattern is taking shape of the military being called upon or physically stepping in to augment the police. Second, instances of soldier brutality against civilians with the [Xhosa verdict](#) particularly fierce in its condemnation of the intransigence of the

⁴ Mo Ibrahim Index, 2022 Ibrahim Index of African governance: Public perceptions of security and rule of law, Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2023.

⁵ Minister of Police. 2018. *Panel of experts report on policing and crowd management. Final report, established by the Minister of Police in terms of the recommendations of the Marikana Commission of Inquiry.*

⁶ Lamb, G. 2021. Safeguarding the republic? The South African police service, legitimacy and the tribulations of policing a violent democracy. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 56(1):92-108.

⁷ Struwig, J., Roberts, B., Gordon, S. and Mchunu, N. Public defence review 2020-2021: an examination of attitudes towards the South African National Defence Force. Human Sciences Research Council, South Africa.

military and political leadership to address the death and soldier conduct in a credible manner. Third, the subtle shift in defence priorities to the [domestic use](#) of the SANDF in future. Fourth, the apparent [contingent planning](#) for a rapid military response if policing cannot stem the tide as in the case of the 2021 riots that flagged the low readiness of public order policing. A fifth red flag is that the SANDF is under [severe financial strain](#) that limits the oft quoted collateral utility of the country's armed services from which its domestic roles must be tapped and calls for careful political oversight and caution.

The absent catalyst: A disrupted intelligence community

One common denominator in the ongoing policing-defence trade-off is the scarcity of timely and actionable intelligence from the State Security Agency. The remnants of party political agendas, financial mismanagement and gross political interference [still plague South Africa's intelligence community](#). Meanwhile, restructuring and oversight recommendations to mitigate the intelligence-capture under the Zuma administration contained in the High-Level Panel's report [appear to progress at a very slow pace](#). As a result, a critical catalyst for delivering timely and efficient police services to South Africa's citizens remains weak. This becomes more of a crisis as the [Crime Intelligence Division of SAPS](#) is also in dire straits implying that the two primary intelligence agencies to direct effective policing operations are underperforming.

While policing service delivery appears to become weaker, the absence of high-quality intelligence inputs lowers the quality of security service delivery. Both are key departments with large human and/or financial resources drawn from taxpayer revenues but underperforming with slow progress to address shortcomings. The policing-intelligence deficit subtly feeds into a trend of a greater military presence in South African society to contain the policing-intelligence deficit, but also an overcommitment of military resources that the SANDF can hardly afford. A growing priority of domestic roles over other mandated defence roles projects a future scenario of a morphed policing landscape in South Africa: a greater military presence domestically alongside SAPS police officers, private security entities and scatterings of provincial or municipal 'special police' and briefly trained 'wardens' all parading under the 'policing banner', with vigilantes likely lingering on the fringes.

Conclusions

South Africa is witnessing a growing presence of military deployments within the domestic society, driven by a complex set of factors. The SANDF is increasingly being called upon to support the national police in delivering security services, albeit that this role is provided for in legislation. This trend is amplified by the SAPS's struggles in streamlining public order and community policing efforts, as well as a sluggish recovery in the politically disrupted intelligence community's ability to provide actionable intelligence.

Concurrently, a proliferation of non-traditional security actors is complicating the policing arena, creating issues related to command and control, and oversight. All these developments are unfolding within a South African society that seeks care, understanding, and high-quality community policing. However, the domestic security landscape is becoming more militarised, and it appears to be less focused on delivering effective community policing and intelligence-based public order policing when necessary. In the absence of quality intelligence, policing in South Africa risks becoming less clinical, numbers driven, fragmented and placing vulnerable communities at the mercy of coercive, rather than softer and caring policing. This situation highlights the need for a more coordinated approach to address the challenges of policing and security in South Africa, while also ensuring the protection and well-being of its vulnerable citizens. Similarly, the situation also requires quality oversight and means of accountability that goes along with an increased domestic military use.

Further reading:

Bohler-Muller, N., Soudien, C. & Reddy, V. (eds.) (2021), *Ethics, politics, inequality: New directions – State of the nation*. Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.

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