

# Answering difficult questions about militarism

With the presence of the military in public spaces increasing and a high level of popularity for the armed forces, it is not always easy to respond to challenging questions that people pose when faced with concerns expressed about militarism. Here we explore some responses to questions about how much the armed forces should be involved in our everyday lives, how they relate to young people, and the effectiveness and consequences of military action.



1. The armed forces are an alternative to crime and poverty for many young people
2. The military needs to educate young people about what they do
3. A 'military ethos' is good for children and young people
4. We need to maintain a strong military capability to keep us safe
5. A strong military is needed now more than ever because of terrorism
6. It is OK for some countries to have a militarised society
7. We need to support our troops
8. The armed forces support peacekeeping and humanitarian initiatives
9. UK and US armed forces use surgical attacks

## 1. The armed forces are an alternative to crime and poverty for many young people<sup>1</sup>

**Entering into the armed forces at a young age threatens long-term health, educational outcomes, career options, future relationships and quality of life. The armed forces should never be presented as the only option young people have; this undermines the concept of full consent, which requires valid alternatives to be available.**

Research shows that the youngest recruits and those from troubled backgrounds are more likely to be exposed to greater trauma and more likely to struggle when they leave the armed forces. They are more likely to be injured or die, to misuse alcohol, behave violently, self-harm and experience mental-health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Two out of every five soldiers who join the infantry before reaching 18 will have dropped out of the army within their first four years. Having left education early and then gained only the most basic qualifications in the army, these young people are particularly vulnerable to long-term unemployment and other problems.

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1. See references for this question and more information *Soldiers at 16: Sifting fact from fiction*, Child Soldiers International, 2016 in: <https://www.child-soldiers.org/shop/soldiers-at-16-sifting-fact-from-fiction>

2. See *The Last Ambush? Aspects of Mental Health in the British Armed Forces*, by David Gee, 2013: <http://www.forceswatch.net/resources/last-ambush-aspects-mental-health-british-armed-forces> and a public health report by Medact on recruitment of children into UK armed forces, to be published in October 2016.

Research by the British Legion found that young ex-soldiers are more likely than their civilian counterparts to be unemployed or, if employed, less likely to find their previous job experience useful. The level of education provided in armed forces training for under 18 recruits is below national standards. GCSEs are not offered, and instead recruits are enrolled in low-grade and poorly recognised courses in only three subjects - English, Maths and ICT.

The 'Public Services' apprenticeship onto which most recruits are enrolled consists of basic infantry training and is not designed for use outside the army. While soldiers in technical regiments such as the Engineers might learn a trade, most of the army's youngest recruits end up in combat roles where the training has little value beyond the army and they are exposed to greater risks.

While convictions for non-violent offences are less common among soldiers than among civilians, the opposite is true of violent offences. A large study of British veterans found that they were twice as likely to commit a violent crime on return from Iraq or Afghanistan as before they enlisted. Research has repeatedly shown that exposure to frontline warfare increases the risk of violent acts afterwards, especially when veterans have a history of adversity during childhood. Researchers have also found that even soldiers who are not sent to war are more likely to commit violent offences after they enlist than before.

## 2. The military needs to educate young people about what they do

**The narrative painted by the military to young people about armed forces life is unbalanced and misleading. The image portrayed is one of fun, excitement, outdoors sports and opportunities to gain skills; violent conflict, ethical issues, the restraints of military contracts and the downsides of military day-to-day life are hardly touched upon. Other pressures, such as wanting to make family proud and lack of other job options, suggest the importance of young people being fully informed before enlisting.**

Military activities in schools and curriculum resources about the armed forces present an unbalanced and sanitised version of a military career and the causes and consequences of military action. The MoD and armed forces admit that they 'provide positive information to influence future opinion formers' yet the 1996 Education Act states that pupils must be given a 'balanced presentation of opposing views' when looking at 'political issues.' Furthermore, since information about nonviolent conflict transformation, peacebuilding and diplomacy is not widely accessible in schools while the military is more likely to be promoted, alternatives to military responses to conflict are being marginalised.

Promoting the military is not conducive to encouraging young people to explore the ethical or emotional issues involved with military action, such as killing or seeing civilians suffering or being killed. Military activities are generally seen as normal and unproblematic because they are not presented as needing public consultation or debate.

Many armed forces activities in schools and colleges are serving the defence interests of the military rather than the best interests of the students. No other public service or private industry would be given the same level of access without strict safeguards in place.

## 3. A 'military ethos' is good for children and young people<sup>3</sup>

**The Government's policy of promoting a 'military ethos' in schools is based on a one-sided view which raises the military above other professions and provides a military framework for school activities which is inappropriate for an inclusive education environment. Targeting disadvantaged communities for these activities raises concerns about equal opportunities.**

The promotion of a 'military ethos' in schools purports to improve educational attainment by encouraging good behaviour and attendance and to build 'character'. It views a 'military ethos' as a combination of confidence,

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3. See more in *Peace Education and the Promotion of the Armed Forces in UK schools*, ForcesWatch 2015, [http://www.forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/ForcesWatch\\_alternative\\_report\\_UNCRC\\_peace\\_education\\_July2015\\_web.pdf](http://www.forceswatch.net/sites/default/files/ForcesWatch_alternative_report_UNCRC_peace_education_July2015_web.pdf) and *The Recruitment Agenda behind the UK armed forces' 'engagement' with students in schools and colleges*, ForcesWatch 2015, <http://www.forceswatch.net/resources/recruitment-agenda-behind-engagement-schools>

resilience, self-control, loyalty, agency, teamwork and problem-solving. There are, of course, other aspects of a 'military ethos' that are less beneficial and certainly less acceptable within an educational environment. The real-world military relies more on unquestioning obedience rather than critical thinking. And despite the armed forces attempts to embrace diversity and equality, the evidence suggests that bullying, sexual harassment, racism and discrimination are endemic.<sup>4</sup>

Directing significant government funding towards military-related activity restricts funding for other activities with more universal appeal which could equally promote positive values. It is unclear how children who are uncomfortable with participating in activities within a military framework are treated. However, in reality, schools are pioneering a great range of non-militarised projects, with strong outcomes. None of the 2016 Character Awards were given to schools for their military ethos projects despite the Government ringfencing a third of the funding for 'military ethos' projects.

While the promotion of the military above other professions suggests an ideological basis for the policy, there are also practical defence-related reasons why the government is keen to embed the military within education - access to potential recruits and promoting the military as 'a good thing'. A further reason is that it provides employment for ex-service personnel, a group that the government is keen to be seen to be helping in the face of concerns that they are not given adequate support.

Military ethos programmes are targeted towards more disadvantaged communities and those at risk of failing education, which raises concerns about a two-tier system of opportunities in place for young people, with some in poorer areas given militarised activities, and a more direct pathway into the armed forces.

#### **4. We need to maintain a strong military capability to keep us safe**

**This belief leaves us blinkered to the biggest threats to human security, such as climate change and resource shortages. Militarism promotes an atmosphere of insecurity rather than a sense of long term security. Investing heavily in the military prevents us from investing in nonviolent solutions to conflict. It also feeds into the international arms trade which increases global and national insecurity.**

The ideology of a 'strong military capability' provides a false sense of security based on immediate short-term fears; it ignores the root drivers of global insecurity and instead exacerbates them.

The biggest threats to human security and planetary existence today include: a failure to halt climate change or even to adapt to it; a growing global socio-economic divide; the spread of infectious diseases; water crises and resource shortages; and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>5</sup> If we are serious about safeguarding the future of humanity and the planet, we need to invest in finding solutions to these problems. Maintaining a strong military capability ignores the reality of the threats we are actually facing and drains money away from confronting them.

Increased defence spending and investment in military technologies feeds into the international arms trade which fuels violent conflict while fostering anger and resentment in international relations. Militarism legitimised and sustained the arms race that lay the groundwork for the First World War.

As the military increasingly comes to the forefront of society, options for demilitarisation seem more remote. Yet, there are examples where countries or alliances of countries have reversed the growth of the military or demilitarised completely. For example, Costa Rica is in a notoriously unstable region and has a history of violent conflict with neighbouring countries. However, in 1948 the country abolished its armed forces, enabling it to invest in health, ecological preservation and democratic institutions.

There is a lack of awareness and funding for non-militarised solutions to conflict, despite the many academics, experts and organisations working to support and learn from local initiatives to build peace and transform conflict through nonviolent methods.

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4. Sources for this include: <http://www.channel4.com/news/sexual-harassment-and-bullying-rife-in-the-army>

5. *12 Risks that Threaten Human Civilisation*, The Global Challenges Foundation, <http://globalchallenges.org/wp-content/uploads/12-Risks-with-infinite-impact-full-report-1.pdf>

Freedom is often seen as the trade-off against a militarised state of security. Following the unpopularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have seen an increasing public relations offensive in UK society to promote the military and institutionalise support for it.<sup>6</sup> The effect of embedding uncritical support for the military within civil society will only become apparent when it is too late to reverse the policy.

## 5. A strong military is needed now more than ever because of terrorism<sup>7</sup>

**There are many examples from around the world to illustrate how militarism and terrorism are part of a vicious cycle. It is active peace-keeping that creates long-term stability.**

Militarist interventions are not only ineffective at reducing the risk of atrocities by non-state actors - terrorism - but can heighten the risk. A case in point is the US-led response to ISIS, supported by the UK. The high number of civilian casualties combined with the ineffectiveness of the air attacks, makes this action strategically futile. Harriet Lamb of International Alert writes: 'Airstrikes will further traumatise an already broken population. Seeing family members and friends killed by a faceless enemy, to whom ISIS are free to give whichever "face" suits them, will no doubt result in more foot soldiers in ISIS' battle against the west.' The Carnegie analyst Lina Khatib confirms that US-led bombing is alienating civilians on the ground. She explains that bombing ISIS angers communities because it strengthens the hand of other parties to violence.

There is now a general consensus that British involvement in the 'war on terror' since 2001 has done more to raise than to lower the risk of further atrocities in the UK. A leaked British intelligence report warned immediately before the July 2005 attacks in London that 'events in Iraq are continuing to act as motivation and a focus of a range of terrorist-related activity in the UK.' Shortly after the attacks, a Chatham House report said the war 'gave a boost to al-Qa'ida' and that 'riding pillion' with the US's 'war on terror' had damaged the counter terrorism effort. The *Rethinking Security* report from the Ammerdown Group puts it this way: 'The role of the wars has been to extend, rather than reduce, the conditions in which extremists' motivation to attack the West may be realised.'

Military action is not the only possible response to the threat of atrocities by non-state actors but while a militarised approach to security is dominant, other longer-term and more difficult approaches will be sidelined. According to the UN in 2016, 'the creation of open, equitable, inclusive and pluralist societies, based on full respect for human rights and with economic opportunities for all, represents the most tangible and meaningful alternative to violent extremism and the most promising strategy for rendering it unattractive.'

## 6. It is OK for some countries to have a militarised society

**Individualised security is a misnomer: our security rests on that of the global community. Nationalist sentiments that whitewash the West's military history lead us to think that we are more responsible or deserving of having a powerful military force and weapons of mass destruction than other countries, but history tells a very different story.**

The idea that it is permissible for some countries to have a strong military capability, nuclear weapons and heavy investment in the arms industry, while preventing other countries from attaining the same, ignores the fact that the military-based international policy of elite states such as the UK and the US has been at the expense of the security and well-being of other countries, and has led to more long-term instability.

The impact of the UK's militarism globally is evident not only in our colonial history but also in the world wars of the last century, as well as in contemporary wars, the fuelling of conflict through the international arms trade, and the instability caused by our foreign policy. A militarised society is unable to constructively reflect on its own past and the part its actions have played in causing wider problems.

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6. See more in *The New Tide of Militarisation*, Quaker Peace and Social Witness, 2014, <http://www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/peace/challenging-militarism-1> and *Armed Forces Day and other ways of manufacturing consent*, Forceswatch, 2015, <http://www.forceswatch.net/blog/armed-forces-day-and-other-ways-manufacturing-consent>

7. See references for this question and more information in *Rethinking Security*, pp. 32-37, 67-70, [http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/files/Rethinking\\_Security\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/files/Rethinking_Security_full_report.pdf)

The Ammerdown Group suggest that security should be viewed ‘as a common right’, explaining that ‘a commitment to commonality is imperative; security should not, and usually cannot be gained for one group of people at others’ expense. Accordingly, security rests on solidarity rather than dominance - in standing with others, not over them.’ They argue that the idea of certain states acting as the world police is an ineffective security strategy: ‘Security grows or withers according to how inclusive and just society is, and how socially and ecologically responsible we are. It cannot be coerced into being.’ The idea that some states should have the monopoly on security is dangerous: ‘The continuing deterioration of security worldwide testifies against entrusting our common well-being to a self-selected group of powerful states.’<sup>8</sup>

## 7. We need to support our troops

**When the UK armed forces are sent into combat, the rallying cry from those who most argued for military action is often ‘support our troops’. It is an example of slogans and language associated with soldiers and warfare that euphemistically gloss over the real forces of power at play and the real consequences of conflict.**

‘Support our troops’ has become a slogan of populist militarism, euphemistically replacing ‘military-industrial complex’, ‘imperial power’ and ‘wars’ with the more palatable and emotive ‘troops’ with its cheery overtones and human face. It stigmatises dissenters, authorising their marginalisation or repression as unpatriotic and ungrateful opponents of individual servicemen and women who fight on our behalf. As Noam Chomsky points out, the ‘Support our troops’ slogan and others like it divert people’s attention away from the real question which is ‘do you support our policy?’<sup>9</sup>

This slogan is part of a wider linguistic norm whereby masculine and romanticised language are pervasive in mainstream discourse about the armed forces. Other examples are ‘heroes’, ‘warriors’, ‘serving the country’, ‘fallen’ and ‘collateral damage’; raw terms such as ‘kill’ and ‘dead’ are avoided. Armed forces personnel may not feel heroic yet they are cast in that role nonetheless. And they may not feel, particularly as veterans, that they are ‘supported’.

The slipperiness of military language and symbols is illustrated well during the period of Remembrance, which gets more elaborate and lengthy each year. While many continue to commemorate those who died in the wars, some mourning the futility of such huge loss, others seek to use the occasion to further establish the militarist narrative that led them to their deaths.

Many anti-war groups subvert the concept of ‘support our troops’ by adding ‘bring them home’. This plays on the establishment’s refrain but provides a different solution; it highlights the point that to truly ‘support our troops’ you would not go to war in the first place, or you would stop the war.

## 8. The armed forces support peacekeeping and humanitarian initiatives<sup>10</sup>

**The modus operandi of the armed forces is ultimately not compatible with humanitarian initiatives. There are many independent peacebuilding, humanitarian and human rights organisations that need support and yet are not promoted in civil society to the same degree. There is a lack of general understanding about peace and conflict studies and the work of nonviolent peacebuilding and conflict transformation.**

As the medical charity MSF says in explaining why humanitarian NGOs should not ally with military forces, ‘there is a fundamental incompatibility with waging a war and conducting humanitarian action.’ Humanitarian initiatives are impartial whereas military forces are by nature partisan because of their primary security function.

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8. *Rethinking Security*, p. 3, [http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/files/Rethinking\\_Security\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.rethinkingsecurity.org.uk/files/Rethinking_Security_full_report.pdf)

9. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7DdWmWUa\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7DdWmWUa_8)

10. Reference for this question: ‘Humanitarian NGOs must not Ally with Military’ by Nicolas de Torrenté, MSF-USA: <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news-stories/op-ed/humanitarian-ngos-must-not-ally-military>

The involvement of the armed forces in humanitarian initiatives is a form of 'soft power'. Military interventions containing humanitarian components are not carried out on the basis of human need: they are highly selective and are adopted on the basis of political and strategic concerns. By being subordinated to the military's broader objectives, such aid is fundamentally different from humanitarian aid.

Depicting the overall mission of the armed forces as being altruistic or humanitarian is propaganda: it whitewashes the public image of the armed forces and distracts from the other, less palatable aspects of armed forces activity. It also serves as a useful recruiting tool as young people seek to find a way in which they can help to make the world a better place.

The humanitarian credentials of the armed forces are undermined when they themselves act as belligerents and, in so doing, often violate international humanitarian law and commit war crimes. The first war in the 'name of humanitarianism' was in Somalia in the post-cold war era, and this war along with more recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq confirm that 'intervening' in a situation to 'restore peace' or 'establish democracy' is not a bar to the disproportionate use of force, torture of prisoners of war, and the use of weapons such as cluster munitions that do not discriminate between military and civilians.

To uniquely identify armed peacekeeping with establishing or creating peace detracts from the need to invest in nonviolent and nonpartisan responses to conflict, grassroots and long-term peacebuilding initiatives and sustainable security approaches.

## 9. UK and US armed forces use surgical attacks

**So-called surgical attacks cause civilian casualties. The increase in remote warfare where the distance between perpetrators and the effects of the violence they wage is a worrying development - it gives war a game-like non-reality and raises substantial ethical concerns.**

The Bureau of Investigative Journalism estimates that U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan since 2004 have led to between 424 and 966 civilian deaths, and between 172 and 207 deaths of children.<sup>11</sup> In 2005, a U.S. 'surgical strike' in Kunduz, Afghanistan hit a hospital, killing over 40 people.<sup>12</sup> The NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan has hit multiple hospitals. As UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, 'When so-called surgical strikes end up hitting surgical wards, something is deeply wrong.'<sup>13</sup>

The language of 'surgical attacks' leads us to think that drone warfare is clean, precise and even humane. However, drone targeted killings have a devastating impact on civilians. In Pakistan, 24 men were reported as killed or targeted multiple times; the missile strikes on these men killed 874 people, including 142 children.<sup>14</sup> In Yemen, 17 men were reported killed or targeted multiple times; the missile strikes on these men killed 273 others and accounted for almost half of all confirmed civilian casualties and 100% of all recorded child deaths. Each assassination target on the U.S. government's so-called Kill List 'died' on average more than three times before their actual death.

The UK's claim of zero civilian casualties in Iraq airstrikes is not credible - there are few, if any, independent observers in ISIS-held areas.<sup>15</sup> NATO was later forced to retract similar claims at the end of the 2011 Libyan air war after investigations found that dozens of civilians had in fact died in allied airstrikes.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of carrying out these acts on those that are given the task is yet to be understood but evidence is mounting that service personnel can suffer severe PTSD and other problems as a result. These young people are sucked into the killing system after childhoods exposed to militarism through games and films; they become the victim of moral injury in the same way as soldiers on the battlefield.

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11. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs/>

12. <http://www.msf.org/en/article/kunduz-updated-death-toll-%E2%80%93-42-people-killed-us-airstrikes-kunduz-hospital>

13. <https://www.rt.com/news/341715-UNSC-resolution-hospitals-msf/>

14. *You Never Die Twice: Multiple Kills in the US Drone Program*, Reprieve, 2014, [http://www.reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/2014\\_11\\_24\\_PUB-You-Never-Die-Twice-Multiple-Kills-in-the-US-Drone-Program-1.pdf](http://www.reprieve.org/wp-content/uploads/2014_11_24_PUB-You-Never-Die-Twice-Multiple-Kills-in-the-US-Drone-Program-1.pdf)

15. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/dec/04/is-uk-claim-zero-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes-credible>

16. <https://dronewars.net/2014/12/05/the-dirty-consequences-of-our-clean-wars/>