

Armed Forces and Civil Protection

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Abstract

Under the terms of the Constitution of the Republic, the Armed Forces, institutionally responsible for the country's military defence, can collaborate in Civil Protection missions. According to the conceptual and doctrinal framework of Civil Protection, as this is an “all for all” activity, where public and private entities coexist, it is also expected, and even required, to change the paradigm of citizen commitment, with a view to greater intervention as the first Civil Protection agent. However, at the level of public representation, there is a tendency to consider this participation as one of the most serious flaws in the Civil Protection system. Therefore, differentiated social perceptions emerge in this panorama, which, due to their respective cultural idiosyncrasies, define the characteristics and organization of the Armed Forces with a spirit and discipline that enable them to have greater capacity to respond quickly and effectively, filling “shortcomings” and “deficits” usually attributed in this matter to civil organizations, given the emergence of new dangers and threats. This work reflects on the implications, advantages and disadvantages that would result from greater commitment by the Armed Forces to Civil Protection. To this end, members of the Armed Forces and other agents, personalities and different interlocutors linked to Civil Protection were interviewed. The conclusions discuss the importance of this theme, particularly in light of paradigm shifts in today's societies, opening lines of action for its understanding and possible development.

Keywords

Civil Protection, Armed Forces, Social Representation and Perceptions

1. Introduction

As provided in the Basic Law of Civil Protection, Law No. 27/2006, of July 3, updated by Law No. 80/2015, of August 3, civil protection is “the activity carried out

by the State, autonomous regions and local authorities, citizens and all public and private entities, aiming at preventing collective risks in situations of serious accident or disaster, mitigating its effects and protecting and offering relief to people and goods in danger.”

In the same diploma, and with regard to the structure of the system, the following civil protection agents are defined:

- a) Fire Departments;
- b) Security Forces;
- c) Armed Forces;
- d) Bodies of the National Maritime Authority;
- e) National Civil Aviation Authority;
- f) National Medical Emergency;
- g) Forest Sappers.

Therefore, the presence of the armed forces in the civil protection system is set out in the Constitution of the Republic, highlighting that they are institutionally responsible for the country’s military defence and collaborate in civil protection missions.

The origins of civil protection are umbilically linked to military systems. The indispensability of non-military preparation in relation to civil involvement in war situations led to the emergence of the organization of civil defence systems.

As [1] states, “Although not referenced, as they are understood today, as specific actions in the field of civil protection, the deepest roots of these systems can be found in the periods during and immediately following the First World War of 1914-18. During that world conflict, the name Civil Defence emerged for the first time, as a concept adapted to non-military preparation and civil engagement in war situations” (p. 3). 1931 would be an important reference in the affirmation of civil protection, and it was on that date that L’Association des Lieux de Genève would be founded, by the French Doctor General, Georges SAINT-PAUL. This association was the basis of the current International Civil Protection Organization.

According to the conceptual and doctrinal framework of Civil Protection, as it is an “all for all” activity, where public and private entities coexist, the decisive importance of the citizens in participating in favour of their own security is also considered, as the first agent of civil protection, through the exercise of active citizenship which, however, although understood, *de jure*, does not always correspond in fact.

Therefore, due to a variety of circumstances, at the level of certain public representations, this participation tends to be considered one of the most significant failures of the Civil Protection system. It is within this frame of reference that different social perceptions emerge, which contribute to defining the characteristics and organization of the Armed Forces. Considering them as endowed with *esprit de corps*, discipline and sense of duty, readiness and operational resilience, they enable them to have a greater and better capacity for rapid and effective re-

sponse, filling the “insufficiencies” and “deficits” usually attributed to civil organizations and populations, for this matter, in particular given the emergence of new dangers and threats.

The aim of this brief essay is to contribute to a reflection on some of the implications, advantages and inconveniences that result from certain social representations about what they consider could (or should) be a possible greater commitment of the armed forces to the civil protection system, with greater responsibility in terms of command and control and coordination, and with the necessary change and consolidation of its structure to respond to day-to-day emergencies and catastrophic events.

2. Culture of Safety and the Citizen

Natural phenomena, with destructive potential, have existed since the dawn of humanity, however, and as the *World Meteorological Organization* highlights, in recent decades, the challenges related to disasters of natural origin, and the complexity of emergencies, have experienced an increase and considerable proportions. Many of these occurrences, increasingly frequent, intense and in unusual locations, with the consequent damage caused to the environment and impact on society, result from human action and climate change that has affected the entire Planet. According to [2], historically all societies have had to deal with dangers and threats which, however, predominantly resulted from actions with causality associated with processes of natural origin. [2] considers that the factor that will distinguish these periods from current modern societies is that the globalization of risks is now a manifest result of human actions and responsibilities, within the scope of industrial, urban and technological development.

Understand the importance of adopting and promoting a culture of safety and knowing the concept of risk, as these should be priorities for all citizens, as well as becoming aware of appropriate behaviours and attitudes in situations of collective risks, serious accidents and catastrophes, which constitutes one of the indispensable steps to implement and guarantee the security conditions of a common social life.

In case of a serious accident or catastrophe, citizens have the fundamental mission of protecting their lives and those of their loved ones and helping those in need, following procedures that must have been previously learned through participation in several projects held at the municipal level or developed by the Portuguese Government. Another action expected from the citizens would be to alert the community and the authorities in case of an emergency and collaborate with relief agents. Searching for information and transforming it into knowledge is one of the requirements.

Since an accident is often unexpected, there will be all the probability that the citizen will be alone at the time of its occurrence, without any other Civil Protection agent who can assist immediately. Knowing the procedures to be adopted in emergencies will significantly contribute to citizens being able to protect their own

lives, those of their family members and even that of the community in which they live, constituting a strong support in the relief actions carried out after the arrival of the remaining agents of Civil Protection.

As mentioned above, dangers have always accompanied human life, which is why the protection of citizens faces a constant challenge posed by the many risks that can trigger disasters and catastrophes. The emphasis on the preventive aspect can be a differentiating factor, in the long term, capable of achieving positive results in terms of reducing the risks and vulnerabilities to which modern societies are subject.

The most varied risks can materialize in serious accidents and catastrophes, with which the alert is intrinsically related. According to the *Autoridade Nacional de Emergência e Proteção Civil* (ANEPC) (National Emergency and Civil Protection Authority), the different levels of alert are assigned according to the severity of the situation and the degree of readiness it requires, progressively escalating between the blue, yellow, orange and red levels (National Emergency Plan, 2021). Following the report of an emergency made by an individual or entity to an operational unit, risk and emergency monitoring and management levels are activated with the aim of alerting Civil Protection agents and entities with a special duty of cooperation.

In the words of Ribeiro (2009), “*Civil Protection is an indispensable condition for promoting the safety of citizens, property and the environment, assuming itself as a right and one of the fundamental goals of a better and more sustainable quality of life for the populations.*” (p. 1) Despite the admittedly vital role of prevention, as mentioned by the same author, Civil Protection is, above all, for the general population, synonymous with emergency and relief. In fact, response actions are widely highlighted as having greater visibility and evidence, to the detriment of preventive or risk minimization measures. Emergency and Relief are “gestures that save”; they are the actions that allow, during or after the catastrophe, to meet the needs of survival and subsistence.

Each country must therefore be prepared and equipped with an effective and efficient public structure that can act before, during and after events. Therefore, it is necessary to promote, on the one hand, a culture of security and mobilize and raise awareness among citizens to prevent risks, as a duty of citizenship and, on the other hand, create and develop mechanisms to reinforce the feeling of security and provide a prompt, effective and efficient response to all types of incidents, protecting and helping people, property and the environment.

In Portugal, the Civil Protection System has evolved in its recent history, following the constant evolution to which the world is subject. Since the creation of the Portuguese Legion in 1936, with the *Estado Novo*, the System has progressed over the years, culminating in the current *Autoridade Nacional de Emergência e Proteção Civil* (ANEPC), whose mission rests on pursuing the objective of achieving better organization in this domain.

The main characteristics of Civil Protection activity are “*permanent character,*

multidisciplinary and multisectoral nature, decentralized, without prejudice to mutual support between bodies and entities at the same level or from higher levels.” [3]. Civil Protection guarantees prevention, preparation, response and recovery from collective natural and technological risks, also acting in the mitigation, combat and control of fires that constitute one of the biggest scourges at a national level, with Portugal being one of the countries with the greatest number of ignitions in the world [4].

ANEPC considers that, in a serious accident or catastrophe, citizens have the fundamental mission of protecting their lives and the lives of those close to them and helping all who need assistance, following previously learned procedures. Although still far from the desired purposes and objectives, projects such as *Safe Villages, Safe People*, a municipal initiative under Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 157-A/2017, of October 27, following a protocol signed between the *Autoridade Nacional de Emergência e Proteção Civil, a Associação Nacional e Municípios Portugueses* (Portuguese National Association and Municipalities) and *Associação Nacional de Freguesias* (National Association of Parishes), are intended to reinforce, among citizens, the awareness of shared responsibility, and to promote awareness-raising actions for the prevention of risk behaviours, self-protection measures and alert to the importance of carrying out simulacra evacuation plans.

3. Armed Forces—Social Representations and Paradigms

Under the terms of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (CRP), article 275, the Armed Forces “are responsible for the military defence of the Republic.” However, as provided for in Article 52 of Chapter VI of the Basic Civil Protection Law, “the Armed Forces collaborate, within the scope of their specific missions, in civil protection functions”.

According to [5], the main dimensions of the employment of the Armed Forces in Civil Protection are:

- Prevention of risks and major accidents;
- Mitigation and limitation of damage caused by disasters;
- Assistance to populations in dangerous situations;
- Protection of the Environment and Infrastructures of public interest;
- Restoration of normality in the lives of populations, after the occurrence of serious accidents or catastrophes.

More specifically:

- Prevention actions, assistance in combating and responding to fires;
- Reinforcement of civilian personnel in the fields of health and safety, especially in the evacuation of injured and sick people;
- Search and rescue actions;
- Provision of equipment and logistical support for operations;
- Rehabilitation of infrastructures;
- Land, air and sea reconnaissance, and provision of support in communications.

When fighting forest fires, this collaboration can translate into actions in the fields of prevention, surveillance, detection, aftermath and post-fire surveillance forestry, in the opening of firebreaks, and in forest fuel management actions.

In accordance with the National Civil Protection Emergency Plan, the collaboration of the Armed Forces will be requested by the approved engagement plans or whenever the gravity of the situation requires it, following the availability and priority of employment of military resources, and under the respective military commands and specific legislation. The Armed Forces may also, through their doctrine, tactics, techniques and procedures, collaborate in logistical support for the intervention forces, or simply provide various materials to the victims (quarantining material, field tents, generators, deposits of water, food, hygiene, warm clothing, clothes, etc.) and installation of camp kitchens and canteens; etc. This collaboration is requested by ANEPC from the General Staff of the Armed Forces (EMGFA).

Within the scope of their Civil Protection missions, the Armed Forces assume a role according to which, under the terms of the Constitution and in accordance with article 59 of the LBPC, “in a situation of war and in a state of siege or state of emergency, activities of civil protection and the functioning of the system established by law, are subject to the provisions of the National Defence Law and the Law on the State of Siege and State of Emergency regime.”

One can then infer that the participation of the Armed Forces, as an agent of Civil Protection in the national territory, assumes special importance in situations that require particular action and collaboration, to contribute decisively to reducing their impact.

According to [6], in the discussion he promotes about the concept of disaster, the author presents three distinct paradigms for its understanding.

The first defines the notion of disaster as a threatening external agent, highlighting that in this conception, the disastrous event is understood as a threat coming from outside the social system, affecting the functioning and so-called normality of life and the existence of a community or region. This paradigm replicates a reading of war models that, as is known, derive from a military doctrine, therefore requiring defence measures and actions against an “*enemy*”.

A second paradigm, representing an evolution in relation to the previous pattern, conceives disasters within the social system, directing its analysis towards an explanatory modelling centred on social vulnerabilities. According to [6], “*Starting from an analysis of disaster seen as a process tightly tied to social vulnerability, the new paradigm considers that the causes of disaster are to be explained on structural as well as contextual grounds. When social risks explode, that are totally raised inward and not outward into the community, then there is a disaster*” (p. 234). Disastrous events are no longer attributed to external causes, developing within social systems, as consequences of society’s existing relationships with the built environment.

The third paradigm directs the analysis to the consideration that disasters rest

on uncertainties resulting from the functioning of social systems, but as effects and consequences of problems created with communication processes and issues, in their breadth and disorder. Here we discuss questions arising from situations related to communication crises, in information mechanisms and processes, both in senders and receivers, which are hampered by the habits and normal ways of operating of individuals and institutions without the ability to adapt to the changes resulting from the new frameworks produced by accidents and catastrophes.

Returning to the role of the armed forces in civil protection actions, it is possible, according to certain representations that are built around their action, to raise some questions, which the defenders of their action address.

In fact, if there is greater engagement on the part of the Military Institution, one of the aspects to consider may be related to the capabilities of the armed forces, namely:

- Would the Armed Forces have the capacity for this intervention, in technical terms, doctrine, personnel and material resources, education and training?
- If this intervention exists, would it be carried out without prejudice to the mission, which is primarily assigned, the Defence of the Nation? In this line of thought, could the concepts of Safety and Security be combined without prejudice to either of them?

Another question to be raised is related to the vision of civil society regarding the military environment, that is:

- Could the military predominance in Civil Protection somehow interfere with the citizens' participation as the first agent or be considered as reducing their freedom and initiative? That is, what impact would this expansion of military intervention have on the citizen's action as the first civil protection agent?

The social representations that resulted from the coordination of the national vaccination plan against SARS-CoV-2, and its impact on civil society, may indicate a favourable reaction, on the part of the population, to a role with greater preponderance of the armed forces, extendable to civil protection actions themselves. Considered, generally, by wide sectors of the media, as an exemplary logistical operation, they can direct and reinforce the importance of the armed forces in the management of critical and emergencies, whether in the field of public health, or public and national security. And, obviously, in disasters, whether of natural, technological or mixed origin.

In this regard, it is justified to turn to [7], who, although considering, in the domain of socio-institutional representations, the prevalence of disasters as "enemy attacks", arising from the roots and origins of military action in civil defence, contrasts, based on statistics and reports produced in multiple catastrophe situations, a more civilist vision, viewing *disasters as non-routine social phenomena*.

In this context, and discussing emergency planning models, the author highlights that, "*for convenience, the dominant model is described here as the 'military' model of emergency planning to indicate its primary roots. Fundamental as-*

sumptions can be understood in terms of the 'triple C's'. The first 'C' points to the assumption that an emergency is characterized by chaos and the other two 'C's' suggest that the chaos can only be eliminated by command and control" [7]. It contrasts, in a logic of understanding disasters as social processes, with the same references as a triple C, the presentation of a problem-solving model, based on continuity, coordination and cooperation.

Currently, the conduct of the national Civil Protection policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Administration. The organization for prevention and assistance to populations is carried out at national, district and local levels, with ANEPC, as mentioned, being the coordinating entity. It should be noted, however, that ANEPC, as a service of direct State administration and, therefore, of an intrinsically civilist nature, has invariably been presided over by officers of the armed forces, with a predominance of the Army branch (with only very slight temporal intervals was this entity led by civilian elements).

As defined in the legislation, the list of Civil Protection agents acts and cooperates according to what is set by the Integrated Protection and Relief Operations System. With regard to the participation of the Armed Forces, as mentioned, this is carried out in accordance with their own duties, according to the National Defence Law in line with the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, to deal with situations of catastrophe or public calamity. This institutional cooperation between the Armed Forces and ANEPC, combining efforts and integrating contributions, is widely considered essential to face current risks.

Taking, now, as a benchmark, the scenarios of other European countries as an example, it can be said that the military universe plays a paramount role in certain social formations in this domain.

Specifically, in the British case, Civil Protection is in close articulation and relationship with security matrices. This relationship results from several historical moments that have had a strong impact on the UK's *security* culture. Firstly, due to its roots in the Civil Defence organizations emerging in the Second World War. The Civil Contingencies Act constitutes the current legislative standard and model for the UK security system. However, it should be noted that in the British system, security forces prevail, with the armed forces acting as supporting actors in situations of terrorist threats, and whenever the COBR alert level is activated.

In the case of Denmark, Slovenia and Sweden, Civil Protection falls under the Ministry of Defence.

In Switzerland and Finland, all adult citizens are obliged to participate in Civil Protection actions as in the Armed Forces.

In Spain, in 2005, the *Unidad Militar de Emergencias* was created, commanded by a General Officer, activated by the Minister of Defence, who is in charge of commanding Civil Protection operations.

In France, the State is the guarantor of the consistency of Civil Security at a national level and is responsible for its doctrine and coordination of resources. Whenever the situation requires special support, France has military structures

with capabilities and capabilities that allow it to respond to emergencies.

Italy has Units, constituted by the Army, distributed throughout the country, with the capacity to be ready to intervene in catastrophes.

In relation to Chile, there is a significant intervention by the Armed Forces, with the appointment of General Officers as the authority responsible for coordinating and executing actions, plans and programs to control the catastrophe.

Outside of European territory, in the United States of America, Civil Protection is entrusted to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, a department that is also responsible for protecting the USA against terrorist attacks, that is, reconciling the concepts of *public safety and security*.

In Brazil, the Armed Forces can be used in cases of support for national Civil Defence and Humanitarian Aid or Peacekeeping Operations abroad. This military support is defined by the intensity or damage caused.

In Canada, emergencies are managed first at the local level: hospitals, firefighters, police and municipalities. The entire Canadian population is involved in emergency management. The Armed Forces are often requested by the Government whenever civil authorities are overburdened or when they need equipment and military specialties.

In summary, with regard to the performance of the Armed Forces, several nations seem to resort to military intervention to complement the actions of civil entities, particularly in the case of droughts, heat waves, fires, tornadoes, heavy rains, floods and, mainly, to participate and carry out humanitarian operations [3].

4. Conclusive Summary

Returning to the basic question of this article, whether civil society and other civil protection agents would be receptive to a greater role for the armed forces, particularly at the level of command, control and coordination, some of the most common representations and perceptions on the topic in question are now discussed, addressing some formulations provided by both sides of the issue, namely, military personnel, other civil protection agents, and civil society. It should be noted that, however, the views presented only reflect judgments of an impressionistic and sectoral nature, not defining any representation of the respective universes where their elements are located.

Generally, the military seems to consider the institution capable of accommodating possible expansion needs by assuming command and control and civil protection coordination functions, as long as they are duly supported by adequate planning. To this end, they advocate evidenced experience with the ability to adjust and adapt to different terrains and scenarios, highlighting, by way of example, their participation in peace support missions, or other more serious missions. Based on planning that allows for an inventory of human and material resources, elements of the military environment consider it possible to anticipate scenarios that facilitate the response to the real event. In other words, faced with different

situations and limited information, they consider it possible, in the real event, to act quickly and effectively.

However, this opinion is not transversal to all social representations, which exist on the part of other social and institutional protagonists in Portugal. There is apprehension, essentially on the part of other civil protection agents, regarding military training to act in disasters, as this is not their area or their essential role and that the armed forces should not intervene in non-specific tasks that take them away from their main mission, which is the Defence of the Nation, which they consider, after all, the reason for their existence. Some of these agents appear, however, to be in favour of a hybrid relationship, with two-headed command and control (with civil and military elements), possibly rotating. This judgment, among other reasons, seems to be based on the idea that the command and control of Civil Protection exclusively by military personnel will be subject to a lack of practical knowledge, resulting from the lack of experience in

Regarding civil society, that is, in the opinion of ordinary citizens, there seems to be ambivalence about the possibility that the command and control and coordination of Civil Protection could be taken over by the Armed Forces. In the eyes of certain fringes of public opinion, the armed forces possess unique specific capabilities, with their commitment to coordination, and not merely the execution of actions, capable of being developed in times of crisis, and can therefore be well regarded by the general population. In another quadrant, readings emerge that consider the armed forces to be well located in the domain of their current missions and functions, not justifying their framing in a different way within civil protection. This would constitute, from a practical and symbolic point of view, a certificate of incompetence and inability of civil institutions to deal with the processes that result from their interaction with the built environment, in its various dimensions, from political and social, to economic and cultural.

On the other hand, the fear of the militarization of society may also explain the position of some other fringes against the strengthening of military intervention.

However, through consultation carried out (interviews undertaken), it is concluded that there is currently, in Portuguese society, a tendency favourable to the role of the military. However, there is a strong discrepancy in opinion regarding the possible primacy of the Armed Forces in Civil Protection, particularly from other Civil Protection Agents who argue, predominantly, that the Military Institution must maintain as a priority the Defence of the Nation, which they consider, after all, the reason for their existence.

This is a complex and controversial topic that does not gather consensus, essentially given the impact that changing the security paradigm and the entities responsible for Civil Protection would have on Portuguese society. Hence, the interest in opening lines of action for its understanding and possible development, notably with in-depth and greater consultation, particularly at the level of state decision-makers and the various intervening actors, by which further study would be recommended, with thorough and comprehensive inquiries and analysis.

Benefiting from the opportunity provided, we finally give expression to the feeling of recognition towards all those who perform their functions under conditions of high pressure and in scenarios of conflict or catastrophe, with outstanding physical and moral resilience, often anonymously, and with the risk of their own life.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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