

Expanding the New Roles of the Military—The Case of Spain's Military Emergency Unit: A Research Note

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Abstract

This note illustrates some of the new roles that armed forces are taking on in developed countries, highlighting the structure, capabilities, and missions developed by the Spanish Military Emergency Unit (UME). The note describes some of these new roles assumed by UME, such as its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and shows, using official temporal and georeferenced data, the growing use of the military to support civilian authorities in response to natural disasters, man-made disasters, and other emergencies alike. In addition, we also analyze public opinion survey data to argue that this is helping to improve society's perception of the armed forces even in a country like Spain where, due to its recent history, a significant part of its population is reluctant to the military. In short, the military is taking on more emergency roles as needs arise and these new roles can help to improve its perception by citizens.

Keywords

military emergencies unit, civil protection, civil-military emergency preparedness, military assessment, Spain

The armed forces are an essential part of the organization of any state, their main task being to defend the country against external threats, current, or potential. Sometimes,

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however, the armed forces also perform functions that go beyond their constitutional mandates as a coercive tool to promote and protect the country's interests abroad (Edmunds, 2006). To these tasks, in recent years, others have been added related to the (re)construction of infrastructures, security or training in post-war scenarios abroad, as well as a growing involvement in homeland civil protection actions. In many countries, certain military actions in non-war contexts have caused a unique, complex and ambiguous (sometimes even contradictory) relationship between civilian and military elites (Burk, 2002). In general, the military authorities try to reconcile the traditional tasks, which establish the preparation for a potential war scenario, with the sense of duty, inherent to the call of society.

Natural disasters (major forest fires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, . . .), increasingly devastating phenomena, allow the armed forces to collaborate with civil authorities, contributing their resources and capabilities with the aim of mitigating the effects on the population of an emergency or catastrophe (Heaslip & Barber, 2014). This contribution is made, fundamentally, by complementing the national civil protection services managed by regional and local authorities, and participating only in those cases in which the magnitude of the catastrophe exceeds civil capacities (Cabigiosu, 2005). Although the armed forces usually enjoy considerable legitimacy in society (Ramalho, 2018), interventions of this nature, as well as other subsidiary actions, such as the so-called "civic-social" activities, represent opportunities to reinforce the image of the armed forces in society (Deverell et al., 2015).

The characteristics inherent in the capacity, organization and comportment of the military have resulted in various countries in recent years opting to specialize, within their armed forces, certain units to deal effectively with these national emergency situations (Goniewicz et al., 2019). The United States, Canada, France, Japan, or Switzerland are just a few examples of nations that perceived the need to assign their military-specific functions related to emergencies and civil protection (Roldán Pascual, 2012), not only because of the urgent and unforeseen circumstances that could arise, but also because of the proven risk involved in the intervention of non-expert personnel in these circumstances. Prominent examples of military actions in emergencies include Hurricane Katrina (a natural disaster that mobilized 70,000 military personnel) (Burke, 2016) and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (and tsunami), which damaged the reactors of the Fukushima nuclear power plant and impelled the Japanese Self-Defence Forces to mobilize more than 100,000 soldiers, 540 aircraft, and 59 vessels (Takeshita et al., 2020). As an example, the main tasks of the French *Unités d'Instruction et Intervention de la Sécurité Civile* include to (1) fight forest fires; (2) fight against environmental pollution; (3) act against floods; (4) protect from technological risks (including CBRN); (5) search and rescue, particularly after earthquakes; and (6) logistical support in operations (Gallegos & Díez Alcalde, 2013).

The aim of this paper is to expound the additional new roles of civil protection that the armed forces are assuming in developed countries by showing the structure, capacities and missions of the UME. We conclude by arguing that these new roles can help to improve the perception of the military by the population.

The Military Emergency Unit

Despite the fact that more than 40 years have passed since the establishment of democracy in Spain, a part of Spanish society continues to see the armed forces as related to concepts such as war and conflict, and not to defense or protection. The Civil War and Franco's military dictatorship left a deep imprint of mistrust toward the army (Tur-Prats & Valencia Caicedo, 2020). Into this scenario was born the Spanish Military Emergency Unit (UME) during the first decade of the 21st century.

The Founding of UME

In the summer of 2005, a devastating forest fire caused by the carelessness of some hikers burned down more than 10,000 hectares of forests and crops in the province of Guadalajara (located in the center of the Iberian Peninsula). The fire also claimed the lives of 11 firefighters. A few months earlier, a severe ice and snow storm caused thousands of people to be trapped on the roads linking Madrid with the north of Spain. The magnitude of these events revealed the need for a unit that, at a national level: (1) had the capacity to face risks, calamities, or public misfortunes; (2) acted in emergency circumstances and provided collaboration and support to the regional authorities; (3) offered an energetic and effective response; and (4) guaranteed the safety of people when a catastrophe put them in serious danger.

These qualities perfectly reflect the military, which bring together a series of attributes—personal and material—that make them uniquely suitable for reacting quickly and effectively in stressful situations. According to the Royal Ordinances (Boletín Oficial del Estado [BOE], 2009) for the Spanish Armed Forces (SAF), the military builds its comportment on discipline, hierarchy and unity, essential characteristics for achieving maximum efficiency from its actions, ensuring high levels of coordination. These are characteristics, which are absolutely essential in emergency situations. This, together with the ability to deploy quickly and in an orderly manner on the ground, moving both themselves as well as cumbersome equipment in a short time, make them a valuable service to society, cushioning the effects of catastrophes and instilling confidence in the civilian population. This argument, after extensive deliberation not without controversy, led to the creation on October 7, 2005, by agreement of the Council of Ministers, of the UME (BOE, 2006).

The decision to create a specific and specialized military unit as a civil protection instrument sparked misgiving, with criticism from various spheres at the time of its creation, including from the military institution itself. Hence, only the seriousness of the situation, or its potential evolution, justifies military action in Spain and, if the circumstances arise, this request must be addressed to the Ministry of Defence. It must be remembered that the actions of the military continue to be questioned in Spanish society and, therefore, issues related to the military require careful consideration. Consequently, military support complements others that are already on the ground, with the civil authorities being responsible for the operational direction of the emergency.

UME Structure, Capabilities, and Mission

UME is a permanent combined force with the capacity to intervene anywhere in Spain or abroad. Its mission is to contribute to the safety and well-being of citizens in cases of serious risk, catastrophe, calamity or other public needs (BOE, 2019). The Unit has a total of 3,600 soldiers from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Common Corps (Ministerio de Defensa, 2022). It has a Headquarters Unit (UCG) from where the five Emergency Intervention Battalions (BIEMs) are directed and controlled. Each BIEM has a particular area of action, a circumstance that allows for better knowledge of the terrain and closer contact with both the civil authorities and the personnel who work in the different institutions that act in emergencies. In addition to UCG and BIEMs, UME has a Transmissions Battalion (BTUME) and a Support Regiment (RAIEM), with access, when necessary, to personnel and resources from other Units of the armed forces to help in disaster management.

The most common emergencies that have required UME's response are forest fires, floods, heavy snowfall, and other adverse weather events. In general, UME goals are to mitigate the risk of man-made or natural disasters and to deal with threats and emergencies. Hence, there are other natural risks such as earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, or volcanic activity that, although less frequent in Spain, are also on UME's radar. To the above list should be added the emergencies caused by technological and environmental risks, as well as by terrorist attacks or illegal and violent acts, and those against critical infrastructures or with chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) agents. Similarly, cultural heritage, which represents the historical legacy and hallmark of the people that constitute Spain, is not free from the risk of damage as a result of catastrophes, whether from natural or human-induced disasters. In summary, the capabilities that UME can provide are: (1) command and control; (2) operational direction of emergencies of national interest; (3) intervention in forest fires; (4) intervention in floods; (5) intervention in winter storms; (6) intervention in earthquakes, volcanoes, and landslides; (7) intervention in technological risks (including CBRN); (8) environmental intervention; (9) attention to the affected and injured population; (10) protection of assets of cultural interest; (11) intervention in emergencies after terrorist attacks, or illicit and violent acts; (12) support to the State Security Forces and Bodies and other Public Administrations; (13) intervention in major air or rail accidents; and (14) attention to multiple victims.

UME Response to Emergencies

Since its creation in 2005 and up to 2021, UME has intervened on more than 600 occasions throughout the Spanish territory (see Figure 1, left panel), being a much-used support resource by all regional authorities, even by those that traditionally remain more distant from the military institution. Particularly, after collecting and analyzing official data from UME and National Forest Fire Information Coordination Centre (CCINIF, 2022; Ministerio de Defensa, 2022), one can see that actions in large forest fires, winter storms or floods have highlighted the usefulness and operability of this nascent military unit. But more than this, it has made the work of SAF more

visible, supporting and protecting Spanish citizens and strengthening ties between the military and society. Figure 1 (left) shows, by region, the actions performed by UME between 2005 and 2021 (Ministerio de Defensa, 2022), while Figure 1(right) presents its relative participation in large fires during 2007–2021 (CCINIF, 2022).

Although it is true that most of the emergency actions carried out by UME have been based on fighting forest fires (see Figure 2, left panel), the missions carried out in its 15-year history have been very diverse (Ministerio de Defensa, 2022), highlighting its versatility and adaptability. This circumstance is evident in the last 5 years in which UME has participated in actions of great social impact, such as the “Extremadura” Environmental Operation, in which it removed 170,000 tons of *Eichhornia crassipes*, an aquatic plant that had invaded more than 175 km of the riverbed of the Guadiana river and was causing disastrous economic and environmental damage.

In fact, the involvement of UME in catastrophes has been growing over time. In recent years, an increasing trend can be seen in the number of days in which the unit has acted (see Figure 2, right panel) (Ministerio de Defensa, 2022). Indeed, at the time of revising this paper (mid-August, 2022), UME had already performed more actions than ever in a single year (personal communication). This circumstance highlights the use that the civil authorities are making of UME, the latter showing itself to be a valuable element of support in critical situations for the civilian population.

The UME Actions During the COVID-19 Crisis

The public health emergency situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic caused the Government of Spain to take the decision on March 14, 2020, to declare a state of alarm throughout the country to deal with an unprecedented emergency situation. A day later, the first coordination meeting to address the measures to be implemented by SAF took place at the headquarters of the Ministry of Defence in which it was decided to activate UME to carry out reconnaissance in the main Spanish cities. These actions were the beginning of Operation Balmis, named after the military doctor and surgeon who brought the smallpox vaccine to the territories of the Spanish empire in America and the Philippines at the beginning of the 19th century.

The implementation of measures was carried out diligently and rapidly, a necessary response to the rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. At that time, neither of them knew what was really happening, nor could they quantify the risk that was being run. In this situation of fear and uncertainty (García-Real et al., 2020), citizens saw that, together with the health services and civil protection forces, the military were among the first to be at the frontline in tackling the pandemic. The operation helped to strengthen the image of the military (Hidalgo, 2021).

During the 98 days that Operation Balmis lasted, representing the greatest effort and military deployment carried out in peacetime in Spain, SAF completed 20,000 actions (5,300 disinfections in nursing homes, 4,800 actions to support hospitals and health centers, 1,200 patient transfers, 20 field hospitals built, etc.) in more than 2,300 municipalities, supporting health services and security forces in their efforts to contain the spread of

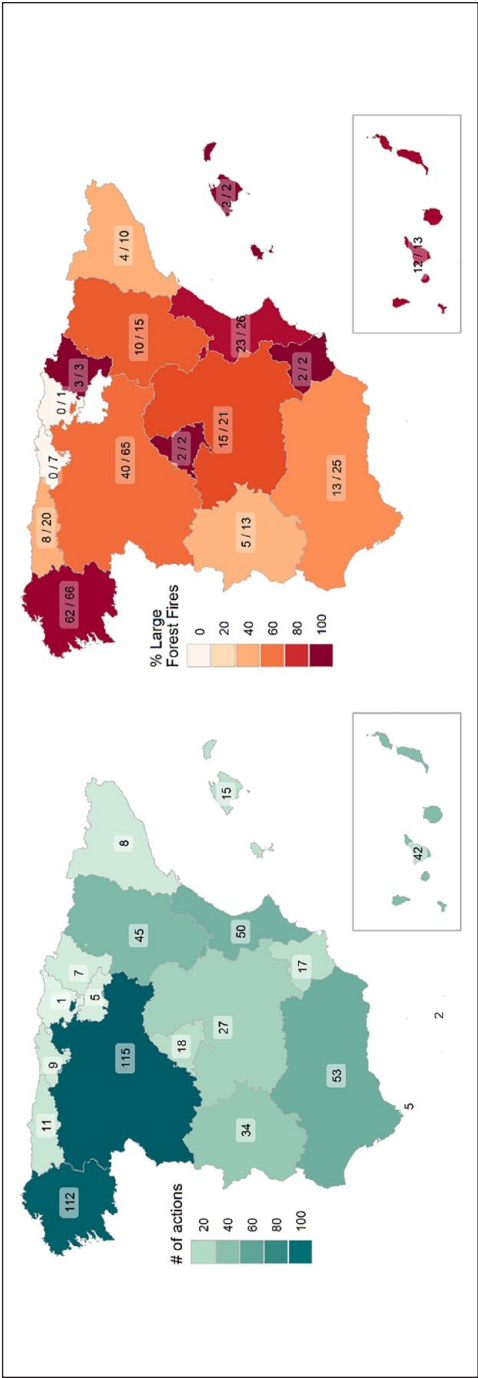


Figure I. Number of Actions Carried Out by Military Emergency Unit Since Its Creation (2005) by Region (Left Panel) and Participation (in Percentage) of Military Emergency Unit in Large Forest Fires (2007–2021) (Right Panel).

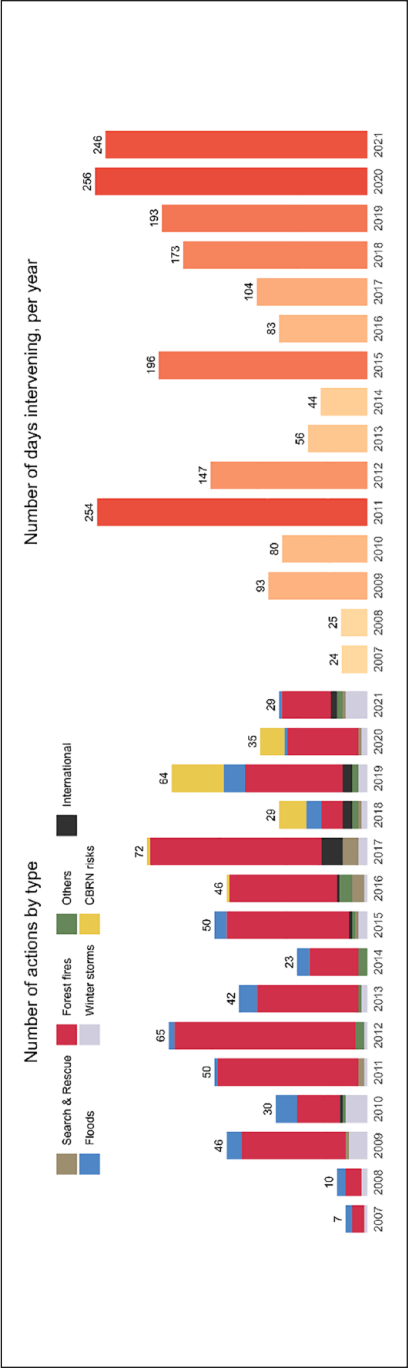


Figure 2. Number of Actions Carried Out by Military Emergency Unit (2007–2021), by Type (Left Panel) and Number of Days Intervening, Per Year (Right Panel).
CBRN = chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear risks.

the coronavirus (Fumero, 2021; Infodefensa, 2020). In addition to these tasks, they performed the difficult mission of helping to transfer the deceased to authorized facilities.

Operation Balmis was not the only military action to take place in Spain related to the COVID-19 pandemic. After a period of strict home confinement, the Spanish returned to the streets, maintaining certain hygienic-sanitary measures, but these measures were not enough to stop the spread of the virus and at the end of September 2020, before a new outbreak (Pérez et al., 2022), the military was activated again. This time, the military collaborated with the regional authorities in track and trace operations to locate and inform individuals of possible exposure to infection, a fundamental task in this phase of the pandemic. This operation named Mission Baluarte, and still ongoing at the time of the writing of this paper, treated the virus like an invisible enemy in an armed conflict (Expósito et al., 2020).

As in Operation Balmis, the first to track the disease were UME soldiers, which gave time for the other SAF units to acquire training and organize their supplies (Tarilonte, 2020), and for the health institutions of the different regions to establish action protocols. With this action, UME reaffirmed itself as an element of cohesion and solidarity among Spaniards.

Public Opinion and Armed Forces

This section presents some results obtained after analyzing public opinion data that could serve as a way of supporting the hypothesis for Spain that the actions of UME are contributing to improving the perception that Spaniards have of the military.

The Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS), the most prestigious Spanish institution in the field of public opinion studies (Pavía & Aybar, 2018), offers the scientific community and society a database made up of almost 2,000 studies, carried out over the past 60 years, which enable an analysis of the behavior and opinion of society on multiple issues. An example of these studies is the one carried out between January 1997 and September 2017 under the title “National Defence and the Armed Forces” (CIS, 2022). A total of 12 surveys (identified with numbers 2234, 2277, 2317, 2379, 2447, 2592, 2680, 2825, 2912, 2998, 3110, and 3188 in the CIS database), with generally a biannual periodicity and $n \approx 2500$ as average sample size, enable an analysis of how the perception held by Spanish society of SAF has evolved in relation to several issues. Figure 3 shows the result regarding the military as a profession. As can be seen, the evolution of this variable shows a change in trend after the creation of the UME, which can be taken as an indication of the positive influence that this unit could be having on the public’s assessment of the armed forces. Causality, however, cannot be claimed.

The 12 surveys carried out by CIS enable us to analyze the period 1997–2017. In 2019, the Sociological Observatory on citizen perception of the activities, plans and programs of the Defence culture and awareness plan, backed by the Ministry of Defence, prepared a report based on a survey very similar to those carried out by CIS. The results of this report continue to reflect the growing trend of a positive assessment by Spaniards of their military, with the attached report recommending, based on the

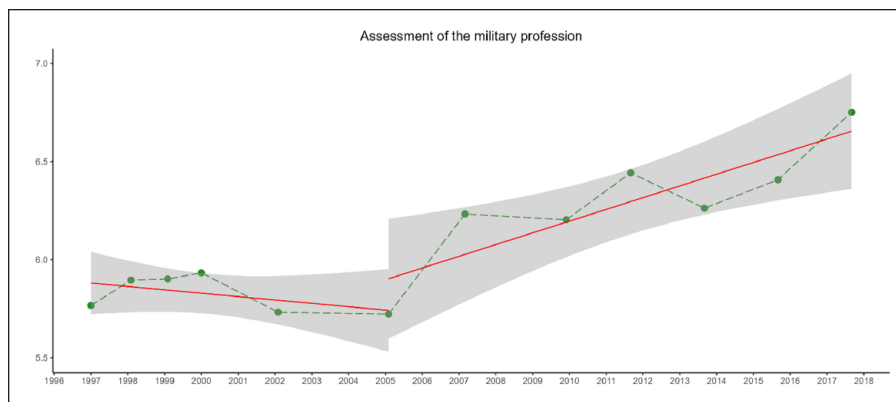


Figure 3. Assessment (Average) in the Period 1997–2017 of the Military Profession

Note. The higher the number, the better the assessment.

opinion of those surveyed, a greater presence of SAF in society, not only in the areas of environmental catastrophes but also carrying out social and welfare work. In short, the presence of more UME-type units is making an impact (Ministerio de Defensa, 2019).

The latest available study that addresses issues on SAF and society in Spain was carried out in October 2021 (Cancio, 2021). This report shows the sympathy and recognition that Spanish society shows toward its armed forces, especially after the Balmis and Baluarte operations. In fact, 80% of those surveyed have a good or very good opinion of the military, a figure substantially higher than previous studies. However, previous comments aside, in no study is the respondent directly asked about the assessment of UME.

Discussion and Conclusions

Thousands of studies conducted by researchers around the world have recorded an increase in the frequency of natural disasters: a frequency that is expected to grow over the next few years, having a huge impact on the global economy and causing human and material damage in all parts of the world. This circumstance, along with the need to justify large budget allocations to defense departments, is pushing many developed countries to assign new social and civil protection roles to the armed forces.

The measures that are being implemented in different developed countries focus on reducing the damage that future catastrophes may cause to the civilian population, with each territory developing strategies adapted to its own circumstances. Fighting forest fires, emergency response to floods, winter storms or earthquakes, or containment/disinfection tasks against CBRN agents are just some of the many services that the armed forces make available to civil authorities. The assignments allocated to the armed forces are growing, broadening the concept of national defense to deal with situations that are quite distinct from armed conflicts.

In Spain, UME has been able to unify criteria and action protocols, demonstrating the value of one of the many qualities of the military: discipline. Operations such as Balmis and Baluarte, or others mentioned in this note, have led to UME (and by extension the armed forces) becoming an element of cohesion that transmits security and comfort to its citizens and generates confidence within the society in which it serves. The missions carried out by UME are growing diverse, COVID-19 actions are examples, with public opinion data pointing to the hypothesis that this also serves to improve population attitudes toward the armed forces, even in a country like Spain with a military dictatorship in its recent history. Future research should be tailored to investigate the trends in the Spanish citizens' perceptions of UME and the tasks that the latter performs. An ad hoc survey would make it possible to directly compare the perceptions that citizens have of UME and SAF.

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