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Militarized Universities Endanger Global Public Health

Abstract

This piece examines the ways in which universities are becoming increasingly militarized in the 21st century.

Keywords

Higher Education, Militarization, Public Health

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Introduction

The Middle East is now the site of many military ventures of the United States (US), Israel, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The devastating health effects of invasions, occupations, and military assaults are therefore vividly apparent in the Middle East today.

In Iraq, widespread toxic exposures have been followed by epidemics of cancer and birth defects. These epidemics continue to ravage the Iraqi population. In the last three years, there has been significant media coverage of the adverse effects of war on public health in Iraq. It is, therefore, astonishing that no global public health agency has acted to protect Iraqi lives. Instead, the World Health Organization (WHO), which is obligated to “*improve health, particularly among disadvantaged populations*”, has declared that Iraq enjoys a very low Western European level of birth defects (1).

In such an atmosphere, global health continues to deteriorate in Iraq and the entire Middle East. Sanctions, the bombardment of whole populations, and the exodus of medical personnel from war-torn areas have led to a dramatic decline in public health across the Middle East.

The inherent obligation of scientists-- to promote public health and well-being-- is echoed in the mission statements of many universities. Stanford University, a top recipient of US Department of Defense dollars and a major site of killer drone research, pledges “*to promote the public welfare by exercising an influence in behalf of humanity and civilization*” (2).

Ironically, university pledges to promote public health and welfare exist concurrently with the serious commitment of many American universities to conduct military research. This union of the military with American universities was fully evident by 1950, when 87 percent of all federal funding for academic research came from the Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission (3). The deep influence of the military in American universities is further illustrated by current reports that 61% of ALL research projects in the US serve military purposes (4).

Universities serving the military

In the US, a staggering \$80 billion per year is spent on defense research and development (R&D) alone. This US military research bankroll exceeds the total of all defense spending by Russia, China, and India combined (5). According to the National Science Foundation, within the US, Pentagon support for universities totals \$3 billion a year. Prestigious US universities compete to draw large sums from the Department of Defense to conduct military research. For 2012, the top recipients of US Defense Department funding were: Johns Hopkins University (\$609 million), the University of Texas at Austin (\$122 million), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (\$111 million), Stanford University (\$72 million), and the University of California at San Diego (\$64 million) (Fig 1). This data shows that US Defense Department funding for these universities has increased fourfold since 2000.

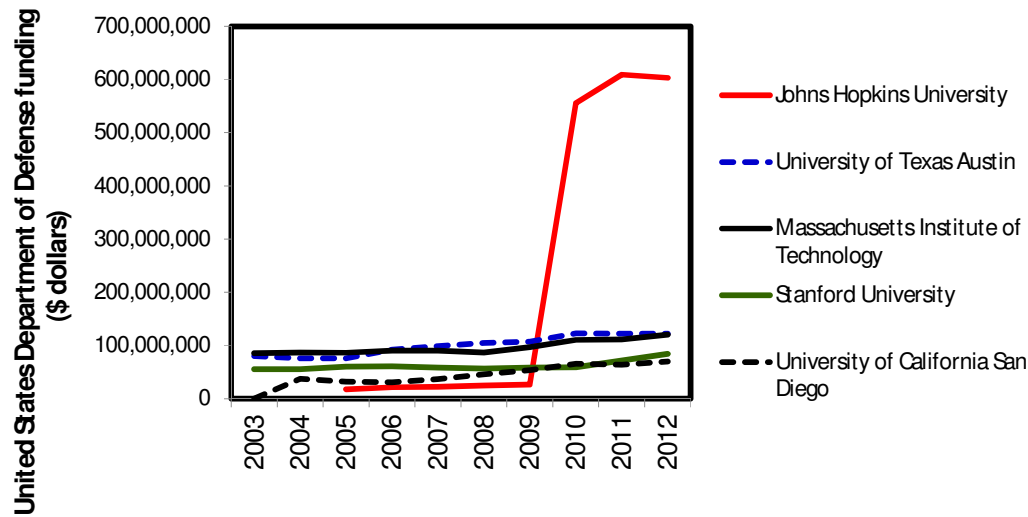


Figure 1- Top United States university recipients of the Department of Defense funding. SOURCE: National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, Higher Education R&D Survey.

Drone research at Johns Hopkins

Since 2010, Johns Hopkins University has been the largest recipient of Defense Department dollars (Fig 1). The Hopkins Applied Physical Laboratory (APL) has been deeply involved in developing killer drone technologies including combat and surveillance methods that have been used in US missile attacks.

“Swarming” technology is their current project, one that promises to be significantly more deadly than their previous military research. “Swarming” refers to multiple drone attacks on a single target. Military.com describes this deadly technology as the following: “Basically, you throw *a ton of drones* at an enemy” (6). This deep involvement of Johns Hopkins with the military, particularly its classified and restricted research, is prohibited by its own internal policies... yet it continues in spite of protests at Hopkins itself.

In the United States, classified and restricted research is strongly prohibited in many universities in order to protect a free and open academic environment. Johns Hopkins policies also pledge that “no classified research will be carried out on any [of its] academic campus” nor will classified information be used to satisfy any academic or career criteria at Johns Hopkins (7).

Despite this commitment, drone research, robotic warfare and public surveillance technologies are heavily pursued at Hopkins. These lines of research bring over \$1 billion to the university each year.

This unsavory picture of academic involvement with the military has disturbed many students and scientists who reject military research at their universities, calling such research unethical and undemocratic.

Military research is unethical and undemocratic

Classified research (drone research specifically) is conducted in secret and its research findings are never disseminated to the scientific community. Open academic exchange and free dissemination of knowledge is at the core of academic freedom. Military research therefore severely violates this principal of academic freedom. Secret (classified) research is also undemocratic since its results are never disclosed or subjected to scientific or community discussion. In secret and without social input, the societal, ethical, and environmental implications of such research cannot be fully discussed and democratically controlled.

Based on these and other serious human rights violations, students and faculty at Johns Hopkins University are asking for an immediate moratorium on Pentagon-funded drone research until sufficient public debate has taken place and public input has been considered (8).

German universities on the Pentagon payroll

More than 22 German universities and research institutes have been receiving Pentagon funding since 2000, totaling \$13.5 million. Karlsruhe Institute of Technology is a leading German research institute with strong engineering faculty that has been receiving significant Pentagon money. Other German universities and research institutes receiving Department of Defense money include: Bremen, Munich University, University of the Saar, Marburg University, The Fraunhofer Society, Max Planck Institute, the Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, Leibniz Institute and Goethe University.

Goethe University has received Defense Department money (\$160,000) to study earthquakes in Iran (9). Consider that Iran has endured countless US attacks, overt and covert, for over 30 years, combined with crippling economic blockades. Consider also past US military history, including its documented plans to wreak environmental disasters on its victims (10, 11).

Similar to US universities, many of the German Universities currently involved with the US Department of Defense are also violating their own policies which prohibit them from doing research or teaching for military purposes. German universities' commitment to no military contacts is articulated in what is called a "civil clause". A civil clause requires the university to conduct research exclusively for peaceful (civilian) purposes and excludes military or civil-military research (12).

Opposing military research at their universities, German students and faculty have organized and protested. The International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility is working to force German universities to honor existing civil clauses or enact new ones to keep military research out of German universities.

Universities should not be an arm of the military

Militarization of academia seriously endangers academic freedom and ethical research. The large-scale presence of the military on US campuses, if continued, will negatively impact the free flow of information and academic association among scientists.

If allowed to continue, military research will direct science toward destructive, hostile and invasive technologies that will further endanger public and environmental health. Others have argued that military penetration of campuses, over the next generation, will produce scholars and scholarship dedicated to the so called “war on terror”. Not only will such scholarship be estranged for civilian and public needs, it will also normalize a constant state of fear in academia. Such a state of fear will tend toward the criminalization of critical thinking. Furthermore, a permanent inducement of “national-security” consciousness will poison free academic discussion and normalize secrecy on campuses (13). Without the ability to think and criticize freely, without the ability for knowledge to be discussed openly, universities will become an arm of the military. Such institutions will be unable to serve the public as they ought to.

University research works hand in glove with rising death

Student and faculty fear of military research at their institutions is not an abstract notion and goes back to the Vietnam War era (14). Our recent memory recalls millions killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Drone attacks are also responsible for rising deaths in Pakistan (15). People in Yemen, Somalia, Algeria, and Libya have been targeted (16, 17, 18, and 19). In Iran, US drones have been used for spying and for intimidation of the population (20).

University research is directly linked to the immense loss of life across the Middle East. In accordance with our mission as scientists and researchers, we are obligated to keep military research out of our universities and protect lives.

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