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Understanding the Legitimacy of Armed Groups: A Relational Perspective

Abstract

This paper analyses the multiple pathways through which legitimacy of armed groups is constructed in conflict-affected states. It adopts a political sociological approach to the study of armed group legitimacy. Such a strategy assists in identifying whether armed groups enjoy legitimacy in a given empirical context and avoids applying pre-determined normative criteria. The focus is on three types of relationships: civilian communities, the state or regime in power, and external actors including regional and international sponsors, to discern which types of legitimacy matter for armed groups in different relationships.

Introduction

Most scholars would agree that the legitimacy of armed groups is a problematic phenomenon. In the international system, states are considered inherently legitimate whereas armed groups are considered by definition pathological.[1] While some of the concepts about legitimacy of states can be stretched to apply to armed groups, the understanding of legitimacy and how it applies specifically to them remains largely under-theorized. This is lamentable, given that, like states, considerations of legitimacy affect the strategic calculations and self-conceptions of armed groups.[2] Like states, armed groups have to accept or resist pressures from the domestic and international audience, to uphold their legitimacy.

How armed groups' approach the relationship with key audiences and the ways in which this affects their legitimacy is at the heart of this study. Drawing on sociological works by Somers (1994), Emirbayer (1997) and Tilly (2003), International Relations scholars such as Nexon (2010) and Jackson and Nexon (1999) have advocated the study of dynamic relational processes.[3] Relational approaches to studying legitimacy in the context of statebuilding adopted by scholars like Wesley (2008), Eriksen and Sending (2009), and Andersen (2012) are some prominent examples of relationalism in International Relations.[4] The relational tradition in sociology encourages an analytically efficient way for studying armed group legitimacy. It encourages a shift away from ontology of entities and their attributes, to focus instead on practices and relations constituting how legitimacy is constructed during conflict.

A note on terminology is warranted. A legitimate armed group is defined as 'the rightful wielder of power, maker and interpreter of rules or user of force and who thereby warrants support and compliance'.[5] Legitimacy can be assessed through a set of 'right standards', a normative approach, or through the perceptions and acts of consent of the authorities and citizens in a given society, an empirical approach.[6] Legitimacy can also be conceptualized across domestic and international levels of analysis. Relations with the civilian community can be the most important source for domestic legitimacy, however, has the potential to shape international legitimacy as well. Relations with the regime in power shapes internal, domestic and international legitimacy. Relations with external actors, such as regional states, international powers and opinion makers including humanitarian actors, non-government organisations and the United Nations among others, is particularly important for external legitimacy, and for the recognition and support of an armed group's political agenda.

The key relationships that will be analysed here to present important implications for the concept of armed group legitimacy include:[7]

(1) the armed group and the civilian population it seeks to represent,

(2) the armed group and the government of the state where it operates, and

(3) the armed group and the international community (including external patrons).

Community and Armed Group Relations

Community support is often discussed as a key means for rebel survival and success. Popular support is defined as 'more than reluctant acquiescence'. It suggests a degree of fit between an armed group and a community.[8] However popular support is not the same as compliance, which entails willing obedience to rules set by an armed group on civilians resident in a territory under its control. Compliance is more that merely supportive attitudes in terms of political or religious preferences. It is more in line with consent, guided by a belief in the appropriateness of the rules being enforced. Compliance links with people's second order beliefs about legitimacy, that is the justifiability of an armed group and its governance practices as necessary for legitimacy.[9] It also links with the social basis of legitimacy, when subjects as a collectivity accept the authority of a ruler as rightful.[10] Understanding the nature of civilian compliance is important for establishing the degree of armed group legitimacy. It offers a measure of legitimacy by ascertaining people's behaviours across a spectrum of *voluntary*, *quasi-voluntary* and *coercive* compliance.

Compliance with commands is voluntary when they are seen to be in the interest of the community as a whole.[11] To secure voluntary compliance, rebel groups must adapt their practices to historically contingent values, norms, and beliefs.[12] In addressing the preferences of local populations, symbolic and cultural or ritualistic norms that are contextually valued can create the necessary fit between the armed group's goals and the community's expectations from legitimate political authority.[13] In the South Kivu region of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, General Padiri's *Mai Mai* militia group developed a system of governance that drew on many of the values, rationalities, and practices of authority of the existing socio-political order of eastern Congo. The group produced a mythical narrative, forged around divine authority and the bipolar relation between autochthony and foreigners. This syncretic mythical narrative resonated deeply with the local society.[14]

At the same time, voluntary compliance is not entirely free of control. Social control mechanisms such as surveillance, symbolic and coercive sanctions remain intact. Stathis

Kalyvas refers to the control-collaboration mode for explaining patterns of violence in civil wars.[15] Armed actors must maximize collaboration from the local population and minimize defection to their opponents. Local information is the key resource held by the population and this resource needs to be controlled. Collaboration is also a function of some element of coercive control by violent actors.[16] For example in Nepal, the Maoists revolutionaries organized the social order in ways that can be defined as *atyanta krās or ātas* in the Nepali language. *Ātas* translates into *intense fear*, a term used by civilian residents to characterize the nature of Maoist action in villages under their control.[17] In one incident registered at Rolpa district, a Maoist stronghold, about a dozen local goons and six police informers were punished with amputation of their limbs. Such violence fomented a reign of terror among the reactionaries, discouraging civilian collaboration with the government agencies in the area. Over time the instrumentalization of violence legitimated it, becoming a necessary political means, driving away the enemies to urban areas, and bringing new recruits to the revolution.[18]

As the level of coercion increases, the nature of compliance becomes quasi-voluntary - a type of compliance that is motivated by a willingness to comply but backed up by coercion, in order to ensure that others will obey the ruler.[19] This type of compliance involves social control and governance activities alongside coercive elements. To illustrate, the Islamic State's (IS) occupation of Mosul, Iraq for example started with a hopeful position for oppressed Sunnis. The almsgiving department collected taxes to divide among needy families. Each family was offered 25 United States Dollars (USD) a month, in addition to rations such as wheat, rice, sugar, pickles, food oil and fuels. Support for IS, among the local youth, was premised on a perception of fairness and justice. IS members were reprimanded by the *Sharia* court if instances of civilian abuse were reported. The IS provided basic services as well. They cleared out all the checkpoints imposed by the Iraqi Army and opened the roads. Locals viewed the advent of IS as freedom from the occupying Iraqi 'Shia' army and freedom from forced detention and compulsory bribes.[20]

With time, coercive elements became progressively stifling affecting the nature of compliance. Residents attending the mosque on Friday were forced to pledge allegiance to the Caliph al-Baghdadi, as their emir. Obedience and non-resistance were demanded. Christians were asked to leave Mosul, following an inability to negotiate the tax they were required to pay to the IS administration. The Christian priests were distrustful of meeting with IS after having experienced brutality in Aleppo, Syria. Hospitals, universities and public spaces came to closely monitored by the IS monitors. Women were instructed to wear the veil at all times. The *hisbah* or religious police enforced penalties for any unsolicited interaction. A professor at Mosul University found correcting student papers with a female colleague got 30 lashes for

the offence. As a result what was viewed initially a liberating force, became synonymous with oppression.[21]

The third type of compliance is coercive compliance. In the case of most armed groups, the basis for compliance relationships is coercive.[22] The conviction of civilian subjects about the appropriateness of rule is inconsequential. Obedience is entirely coerced and not based on a set of shared beliefs (substantive) or perceptions about the decision process (procedural).[23] Coercive compliance is characteristic of resource-rich groups that have access to revenue-generating resources. Such groups can fund extensive military capability to enforce territorial control and have low reliance on civilian contributions in material terms.[24] Methods of extraction both of rents and of local resources, such as information, material support, and recruits are enforced.[25] Similarly, armed groups that choose to depopulate territories under their control, and those that are roving in nature are unlikely to enter into any meaningful relationship with local constituents. They remain less responsive and more fluid in their interaction with civilians and likely to be more abusive towards civilian populations. Examples include the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) under Jonas Savimbi and the Ex-Seleka and Anti-Balaka groups in the Central African Republic.[26]

In contrast, resource poor groups remain largely dependent on local communities for material and non-material resources, information and recruits. These groups are more attuned to local grievances and norms and are least likely to adopt a coercive compliance approach (). For example, in Northern Ethiopia, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a Marxist styled guerrilla army forged relationships cooperative with peasants of Tigray. The leadership of the TPLF were mainly from urban locations, they needed the local knowledge of peasants to survive in unfamiliar rural areas. In the Ethiopian example, the TPLF set up local councils called *bayto* to administer the liberated zones. The *bayto* provided a top-down mechanism for wartime governance, and served to implement the TPLF's war policies and generate the maximum contribution to the movements project. Civilian administration supported the military agenda and health workers and local administrators were regarded as 'fighters' in the people's struggle.[27] The armed group and civilian relationship was cooperative and mutually reinforcing, making compliance less coercive in nature.

Most scholars would agree that coercion, as the basis for authority can be useful in the short-run, however in the long run it is likely to undermine legitimacy and support.[28] Alienating the domestic support base results in fomenting civilian resistance. The degree of resistance, ranges from partial to full, and is determined by the quality and character of pre-existing state institutions.[29] Mampilly (2015) argues that civilians politically habituated by rentier state

fiscal policies are unaware of their ability to influence the political authority. Under such conditions, armed groups can become de facto rulers more easily. By contrast, states where the bureaucracy establishes tax bases, and provides public goods, civilians are habituated to having a say in political affairs. [30] When communities are accustomed to high quality institutions that are both legitimate and effective, introducing new structures that depart from these practices can invite resistance. Civilians can escape from rebel held territories, when they find procedures or outcomes counter to normative expectations. Unarmed civilians can defy armed insurgents through non-cooperation with group demands. In rare cases, civilian may disagree with, disobey and even openly confront armed combatants who rule their communities. [31] When civilian opposition groups take up arms supported by third party sponsors or the state, they end up contributing to oligopolies of violence, and create more competition for the armed group. [32]

From a legitimacy perspective, presence of plural authority structures usually in rentier states, makes it necessary for armed groups to negotiate with different actors to develop their own structures and practices of governance. Parcelized authority structures can inhibit the creation of rebel legitimacy. This contrasts with a highly penetrated bureaucratic state, in which rebels confront cohesive institutions and networks of power instead. Dynamic patterns of mutual dependency and influence emerge from sustained interaction and exchange between civilian communities and armed groups when voluntary compliance is encouraged. [33] Non-coercive elements of collaboration emerge, that make armed groups responsive to reactions from the social environment and somewhat reliant on them for legitimacy.

Turning now to the exchange dimension of compliance. Popular support for an armed group draws on different types of interaction. These include utilitarian exchange of core services such as security and justice. Service provision by armed groups generates output or performance legitimacy among the domestic constituency. Service provision is rarely a constant, varies over time, and is often linked to shifting territorial control and resources at the disposal of armed groups. As such, service provision is more likely when rebels require civilians to engage in productive activities such as farming. [34]

The relationship between justice provision and empirical legitimacy is an interesting one. If armed groups operate courts and if in the eyes of the local population, these courts contribute to more justice, relative to the formal institutions of the state, this is likely to increase an armed group's empirical legitimacy. [35] For the local population, higher empirical legitimacy by definition leads to higher compliance. [36] If the population is compliant to the armed group's

rule, this can result in the resumption of ordinary activities (food production, trading and the like) and higher stability.[37]

At the same time, performance legitimacy that is premised on coercive methods and norms removed from pre-war social order is likely to become weak over time. Groups such as the Taliban and the *Al Shabaab* are known to run Sharia courts, enforce law and order. Yet, their sanctions are known to be extreme, often violating human rights, which has weakened their empirical and domestic legitimacy vis-à-vis the civilian population.[38] Lack of adherence to international human rights standards in their interaction with civilian populations had negative implications for their normative and international legitimacy as well.

Apart from services and performance considerations, parts of the population will collaborate with an armed group based on a cost-benefit calculation about the utility of services offered by the armed group in exchange for their support. Popular support can also be loyalty driven, rooted in trust relationships linked to family, tradition, customs, patronage, personal ties and kinship relations. Armed groups representing interests of a particular ethnic group, people or class, can claim to protect their interests from the state, landed elite or other religious and ethnic groups. For example community defence groups that identify with the needs and interests of the civilian community, create solidarity-based support. These communal solidarity ties encourage representative or normative legitimacy.

Communal support can also be a product of wider mobilization processes. Similar to social movements, an armed group's demand for political change can resonate with the population's experience, religious beliefs and grievances thereby eliciting support.[39] Value-reciprocity helps legitimize rebel claims to authority, but also makes civilians (and other claimants to authority) able to challenge rebel governance on the basis of similar normative criteria.[40] For example, combining traditional (tribal norms) sources of legitimacy with religious Islamic sources of legitimacy can present tensions as in the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan.[41]

State and Armed Group Relations

Klaus Schlichte notes that 'states are deeply involved in the emergence and logic of armed groups' since it is 'within state institutions that the core skills needed for armed rebellion are transmitted'.[42] He identifies a three fold pathway for explaining armed group formation rooted in the state. First, groups formed as a result of state repression; second, groups formed by deliberate efforts of exiled groups; and third, pro-government groups created by state agencies to bolster counter-insurgency capacity. State repression can foment non-violent

protests that turn progressively violent in response to a state's military crackdown. Syria in recent years is a case in point. The conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone are prominent examples of how state weakness opens up the political and governance space for alternative actors, like exiled politicians warlords to step in. The capacities built by states enhance the likelihood of armed group formation especially in the case of pro-government militias. In Myanmar, the government has used 'border guard forces' and ethnic militias to fight other groups.[43] According to observers, much of the power of non-state armed groups in Indonesia lies in their connections to elements of the state.[44] States are equally critical in the transformation and demise of various armed groups. Depending on the level of animosity involved, an armed group can face military defeat at the hands of the state, and incorporation into the security sector. In the case of weak states, armed groups can become the state, or enter into a power sharing agreement that accommodates its political goals in a new government set up.

From a legitimacy perspective, non-state institutions of public authority derive legitimacy from their ability to communicate a 'language of stateness'.[45] Mancur Olson's stationary bandit thesis suggests that it is only by replacing the state in respect of key public service functions that an insurgency will be able to obtain political legitimacy.[46] How well armed groups can deploy the paraphernalia of the state, mimicking its procedural and symbolic forms of legitimacy determines their success in supplanting the state in the popular imagination.[47] Governance and services delivery is viewed as a central piece of performance or output legitimacy for the state. It is the tangible or the visible part of seeing the state. In the case of armed groups, governance aspirations are often part of their project to fulfill the social contract towards the local population in areas where the state is absent or receding. Scholars such as Zachariah Mampilly find that rebel governance tends to be more efficient in areas where the state or other non-state forms of regulation, such as traditional, or religious authorities were strong before the civil war.[48]

Armed groups that are aspirant 'states in waiting' or 'embryonic states' look and behave like 'would be' states. By mimicking or doing the state (act) they attempt to progress towards statehood, which is seen as the main goal or aspiration.[49] They provide public services to populations under their de facto control, collect taxes, organize policies, administer justice and patrol borders.[50] In northwest Uganda, local councils are known to carry out moral cleansing by organizing vote by secret ballot to identify and expel those found guilty of practicing withcraft.[51] Research on South African and Nigerian vigilantism also demonstrates a reliance on the symbols, rhetoric and institutional forms mimicking the state.[52] In South Sudan, the SPLM/A engaged in symbolic practices of statehood such as official flags,

printing of a national currency, and a national anthem.

Armed groups agendas relating to governance can range between proto-state and anti-state forms. Anti-state governance, when an armed group stands in violent opposition to the state has different implications for legitimacy, compared with proto-state governance. In the latter case, an armed group seeks to replace the regime in power and pursues an alternative political agenda towards that end. Proto-state groups tend to provide widely shared public goods often directly associated with legitimate institutions such as security and justice.[53] Proto-state groups set up civilian administration with varying levels of civilian involvement motivated by larger political goals. Nelson Kasfir argues that civilian administrations are encouraged when the armed group views it as instrumental to achieving its goals of separation, secession or liberation.[54] In his study of rebel administrations in South Sudan, Sri Lanka and the DRC, Mampilly found that the LTTE demonstrated a highly evolved and effective administration; the SPLM/A presented a moderately effective and the RCD - an ineffective governance set up. Proto-state groups often have well-developed political wings. They demonstrate willingness toward political participation, and towards acquiring political legitimacy.

Not all armed groups have a coherent political ideology however. Many focus merely on exercising control through resource extraction or through establishing a monopoly over violence with a minimalist orientation towards governance The RCD in DRC is a case in point. Although the group developed a civil administration system with specific departments for health, social affairs, and education, other types of public services continued to be delivered by the central government. The RCD had a poor record of governance in territories under its control; it lacked an agenda for political renewal and showed weak motivation to take over state power.[55] Armed groups with anti-state agendas often pose a source of negative competition for the state. They are likely to weaken the state's coercive capacity and support base by creating parallel structures that weaken the governance systems of the state or its democratic and secular makeup by propounding a more religious or conservative worldview. Using international capital and military assistance to challenge the state militarily, or hollow out the state by using militias that are incorporated into the state's patronage networks.[56]

Providing an element of governance does not necessarily result in domestic or external legitimacy. The example of the Islamic State is a case in point. Organised as Sunni Muslim theocracy the Daesh's concern for establishing a law based political order is well documented through online videos and its English language magazine *Dabia* that shows photograph of bridge repairs, electrification, medical facilities and street cleaning.[57] However, its claim of establishing a Caliphate is problematic on several counts. Mohammed Ayoob (2016) argues

that the declaration of an Islamic State is a myth. The claims around religious tradition do not resonate with the political vocabulary of contemporary Muslim societies. Historically, the appeal of such a 'Caliphate' concept was rooted in a response to European colonization during late 19th and early 20th centuries.[58] In 2014, a British polling firm Opinion Research Business (ORB) survey, found that the IS's goal of creating a pan Arab Islamic Caliphate received an approval rating of four per cent from a sample of 1,014 adults resident across Syria's 14 provinces.[59]

Types of relationships: Collusive, Conciliatory and Conflicting

Insurgents and states are known to develop relationships during protracted armed struggle that are both cooperative and conflictual in character.[60] The different types of interactions with the state and how they affect armed group legitimacy however remain poorly conceptualised in practice. In this study, relations with the state will be analysed along three types, (1) collusive, (2) conciliatory and (3) conflictual.

In case of *collusive relationships*, the state tries to 'buy out' the loyalty of contenders in the political marketplace or even better to incorporate the political opposition through a complete 'take over'. Offering money, economic opportunities, and political concessions through the creation of limited access orders (a system that manipulates the economy in order to create a system of rents by providing preferential access to valuable political and economic resources to powerful non-state actors) are some of the most effective ways to buy out potential opponents.[61] Rent creation, provides the glue, enabling elite groups to make credible commitments to one another to support the regime and perform their functions. Richard Synder (2006) argues that where states are able to build institutions of joint extraction with non-state groups based on the utilization of such incentives and threats, lootable resources may actually become a means for the creation of stable order.[62]

For example, groups in Burma's borderlands straddling the China/Thailand border like the Karen National Union and the Shan State Army had entered into ceasefire agreements during the early 1990s that allowed the insurgents to retain their arms and govern pockets of territory without government interference.[63] The same reasons that allowed insurgent groups to grow in strength, such as taxation of lucrative cross-border trade explained the State's desire to control these areas. By offering ceasefire agreements, the Burmese military state created a preferential access among other things to the drug economy, offered money-laundering services, and lucrative business opportunities to leaders of former insurgent groups, thereby increasing the costs of violence and encouraged cooperation with the state.[64] From a

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legitimacy perspective, collusive relationships can be destablising for internal legitimacy of armed groups. The re-emergence of tensions between the Tatmaduw and the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) since 2011 after 17 years of ceasefire of hostilities supports this assertion. Resentment against first generation KIO leadership, for selling out to the state, has weakened the internal legitimacy of the group. It has also encouraged remobilization of younger officers demanding substantive political dialogue with the State.[65]

In *conciliatory relationships*, the state accepts the autonomy of non-state armed actors because of shortcomings. It either lacks the military capacity to recapture territory under the control of armed groups or considers such territory to be non-strategic in nature. The state – armed group relationship is reconciled around a political and military stalemate, where the armed groups secures partial autonomy over territory it controls, offering basic security, with state remaining in control over core services. The Kurdish areas in Syria are a case in point. After the Assad regime partially withdrew its military from Kurdish areas in July 2011, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) secured control over three large, non-contiguous Kurdish majority areas along the Syria-Turkish border. It proclaimed as a de facto autonomous region called Rojava. It includes, Afrin, Kobane and Cizire.[66] This territory is the size of Qatar and Kuwait combined. Regime control however continues over government services, state employees in school and health centers paid by the state. The reason for such a conciliatory position from the Syrian government can be rests in the objectives of the PYD. As a group, the PYD aims decentralization and autonomy rather than nationalist determination. It is a social democratic, secular, and cross-communal in character. In the current Syrian quagmire, the PYD presents a lesser evil compared to groups such as Daesh, the Islamists such as al Nusra Front, and the loosely aligned factions operating under the label of the Free Syria Movement (FSA). These considerations have resulted in a tacit deal with the Syrian state that enables the YPG/PYD to operate autonomously.[67]

In other cases, a conciliatory relationship relates to the diminishing value of rebellion. The DRC is a case in point. Multiple armed groups have been active in eastern DRC since the mid-1990s. Instability in the east however has not precluded a relatively stable political settlement from emerging at the level of the Congo as a whole. President Kabila has been in power since 2001. During the transitional period (2003-2006) that followed the Second Congo War, when ex-belligerents committed to a power-sharing agreement, manipulating armed groups continued to be a valued political currency.[68] Political claims and the ability to unleash violence were used to access important positions in the political administrative apparatus and security forces. In the post-transitional political settlement, by contrast,

leveraging armed groups yielded decreasing benefits in national politics. This has meant a diminishing significance of armed groups in the national political arena. Several factors account for this shift. First, with armed groups now smaller in size, and numerous in numbers, they lack military strength and geopolitical significance of larger groups such as the RCD. Second, over time, the Presidential patronage network has reinforced its grip on the state apparatus and society. They have achieved direct control on vital areas of political and economic importance, such as the capital city Kinshasa and extractive industrial enclaves in Katanga region. Third, through a mix of cooperation, coercion and international support, the Congolese state is now better able to address challenges to its authority.[69]

Conciliatory relationships between the state and armed group, strengthens empirical legitimacy among internal supporters, domestic constituents and the international community. A state's recognition or willingness to engage with an insurgent group strengthens the latter's legitimacy claim vis-à-vis the internal members, broader national and international community. From a normative perspective, the states acceptance of a party as a legitimate interlocutor will confer broader legitimacy upon it, only if a certain amount of congruence exists between the behavior of an entity and the shared beliefs of the community in question.[70]

In *conflictual* relationships, the state is engaged in a military conflict with an armed group with political, military and diplomatic efforts geared towards defeating the armed opposition. Whether rebels win or lose, depends on a variety of factors, such as rebel access to key resources (external supporters, easily exploitable resources (drugs, timber, artifacts, alluvial diamonds); the state's military capacity, resources, and per capita Gross Domestic Production (GDP); and last but not least, the role of civilian held information in relation to state counterinsurgency efforts.[71] The nature and quality of rebellion also matters. Balcells and Kalyvas (2015) note that revolutionary rebels tend to be higher quality rebels. When the main rebel group is socialist in its political-ideological makeup, it is likely to fight a highly demanding irregular war rather than conventional or symmetric non-conventional war. These contests are longer-lasting and result in greater casualties. However, socialist rebels defeated at a higher rate as well in what they term is a 'Marxist paradox'.[72]

An outlier to this finding is the example of Nepal. While political negotiations brought the military conflict to close, the rebels used a combination of violent and non-violent action in countering the state. The rebels combined a strategy of mobilizing mass support, territorial encircling of cities after taking over the villages during 1996-2006; undertaking developmental projects in rural areas and launching discriminate violence against state agents

and civilians perceived as pro-government. Alternating rebel responses between violent and non-violent actions led the Nepalese state to commit strategic blunders.[73] When the state used violence and rebels retaliated with nonviolent protest action (demonstration and negotiations). Repeated negotiation led to the ceasefire in 2006, through a process of non-violent interaction during ceasefire, and the use of targeted attacks versus indiscriminate violence, the Maoists were able to consolidate their political position.

Severe repression by the state can result in loss of civilian support. A rise in human rights violations by the state can also incite negative world opinion. This is particularly the case when pro-government militias (PGMs) are introduced into civil conflicts. Both the state and external actors are known to sponsor armed militias in civil conflicts. In Iraq, the US sponsored the Sunni Awakening groups to fight Islamist insurgents. Afghanistan formed militias to battle the Taliban. Syria includes several sponsored groups split along sectarian lines, such as the Shia militias supported by Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.[74] The civilian Joint Task Force in Nigeria to counter Boko Haram, and the *Salwa Judum* units set up to fight Maoists in India's mineral rich tribal belt are other prominent examples. Jentzsch et al (2015) use the term militia for an armed non-state actor that is 'anti-rebel'.[75] PGMs are armed groups that contribute to the government beyond sharing the same enemy.[76] These outfits can consist of civilians or former rebels.

While on the one hand, PGMs bolster legitimacy of the government's counter insurgency campaigns, by demonstrating local or ethnic support for government, and provide governments protection from allegations of human rights violations, there are important disadvantages.[77] PGMs are known to undermine government authority, as they are not fully integrated into the formal security apparatus.[78] Delegating violence to irregular forces implies higher civilian casualties. PGMs are associated with severe forms of repression, as in most cases government cant or wont control their violence.[79] Fragmentation can result in splinter groups allying with government to access arms or resources. In 2004, the Karuna faction split from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and collaborated with the government, leading the military defeat of the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka. In other instances, conflictual relations can move towards more conciliatory exchanges. In case of the Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah, the relationship between the state and armed group can no longer be understood as zero-sum or oppositional. In both cases there is a strong link between political and social identities and political practices.[80]

Conflictual relationships affect the legitimacy of armed groups as follows. State repression can strengthen civilian support for armed groups. Targeted attacks can weaken the internal

cohesion of an armed group and result in fragmentation, and the loss of international legitimacy and support. Syria is a case in point. The armed resistance or rebellion has evolved significantly since late 2011. Initially called the Free Syria Army (FSA), a loose coalition of armed anti-regime groups, under the command of Colonel Riad al Assad, who were working with backing from Turkey, played a prominent role in military operations. Fragmentation of the FSA into more than 1,000 loose fighting units, each with distinct mode of organisation and stated goals left the resistance without any organizing principle. Several umbrella groups such as the Islamic Front, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, Jabhat al Nusra, and Kurdish militias starting operating in uncoordinated pockets. While they shared a common enemy in President Assad, the diversity of objectives and motivations that underpinned group formation and actions, saw a rise in sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shia/Alawite sects and the creation of liberated areas such as in Aleppo.[81]

Several attempts to build a united front, throughout 2012, were undercut by competition over influence in managing donors. Groups under the FSA were unable to secure the resources necessary to develop sufficient organizational capacity to attract and retain fighters and effectively govern areas under their control. Extremist groups, with Islamist and Salafi Jihadist inclinations (i.e. those with imperialist Islamist ambitions) were better funded and more resilient. While domestic legitimacy of the group was enhanced in the eyes of its civilian supporters, alongside international legitimacy among human rights watch dogs, the strategy of previous administrations in the UK and US (under David Cameron and Barack Obama) of supporting a moderate opposition grew problematic.[82] A lack of unity in opposition efforts made coordination and cooperation difficult, a loss of international confidence and backing followed, undermining its national and international legitimacy as well.

Armed Groups Relations with External Actors

From a western peacemaking model, non-state legitimacy especially that of traditional and local forms are celebrated in so far as they remain subservient to and instrumental for an international and normative understanding of legitimacy. In the case of armed groups, the reliance on political violence and terrorism means, international actors rarely recognize them as legitimate political actors. Historically, groups that support national liberation goals with a view to transforming into a secular democratic government were successful in securing external recognition. Examples include Eritrea, South Sudan and Namibia among others. International legitimacy, recognition and support are not the same however. States and other

international actors such as diaspora communities, co-ethics, and transnational terror networks routinely provide material, logistical and ideological support to armed groups.

Data collected by Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan (2009) reveals that a majority of all rebel groups active since 1945 either had explicit support of a foreign power or are alleged to have foreign ties.[83] For example the Mozambican National Resistance movement (RENAMO) in Mozambique came into being largely as a result of Rhodesian and South African aid. Rebel movements that originate from the grassroots political movements also become dependent upon foreign fighters over time.[84] Recent research on external sponsorship suggests rebel groups are less likely to attract external support when they are very strong and very weak. This is because groups that are militarily weak, fractured, and disorganized are unlikely to pose a significant challenge to their host state to an extent that justifies supporting them. Stronger groups would prefer their own, reliable, resource streams over external alternatives that impose constraints on their behavior. Dependence on external patrons can also trigger a loss of domestic legitimacy or weaken internal cohesion when groups deviate from original political goals in pursuit of external agendas.[85]

Transnational linkages and interstate rivalries are important for rebel groups to receive external support. Salehyan et al (2011) find that conflicts where the government side has external support are much more likely to also see support for the rebels.[86] However external sponsorship does not always equate to international legitimacy. Several normative and behavioral factors shape international perceptions in this regard. Commitment to western liberal norms such as the protection of human rights, and adherence to international laws of conflict are important normative criteria for securing international legitimacy. A higher degree of international legitimacy is linked to moderate political views.[87]

From the perspective of armed groups, their political objectives, resource base, and the ability to control territory and population determines whether international legitimacy is actively sought. Lasley and Thyne (2015), suggest that secessionist groups seek international legitimacy more actively, and are more likely to change their behavior to appeal to that legitimacy. Revolutionary groups have less reason to seek international support and legitimacy during conflict. If they establish a new regime; the act itself provides legitimacy for such groups.[88] By this logic, secessionist groups or groups seeking change in the existing borders are unlikely to secure international support/legitimacy because of the revisionist nature of their claims. These groups are therefore likely to focus on nationalist or religious and ideological narratives that appeal to a specific ethno-linguistic group amongst the domestic population, diaspora communities and similar armed movements in the region. The

Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, the SPLM/A in South Sudan are prominent examples of secessionist movements that have appealed to both domestic and selective international audiences to legitimise their claims.

Reliance on external sponsors and international legitimacy, are likely to result in higher levels of casualties, longer and intractable conflicts that are difficult to settle through political negotiations.[89] For example the RCD in the DRC Similarly the RCD was composed of four main groups. Former Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL) leaders, former followers of the Late President Mobutu, some well-known academics and professionals (as international interlocutors) and anti-Kabila figures.[90] It was largely reliant on Rwanda as an external patron. Apart from a poor track record of human rights, the group did not make any efforts to garner local support in the eastern Congo and despite a somewhat stable political settlement at the capital Kinshasa, the DRC continues to remain susceptible to cycles of localised violence.[91]

External or international legitimacy is no doubt of political importance, but it does not automatically translate into domestic legitimacy.[92] Rather, it can be at odds with domestic sources of legitimacy.[93] Fragile states such as Afghanistan under Karzai, despite strong international legitimacy, enjoyed little domestic legitimacy. By contrast, states such as Somaliland, a de facto state has proved surprisingly resilient and stable, because the citizens belief in the legitimacy of the state offers strong domestic legitimacy. International legitimacy is considered the least important for stability and resilience of a state.[94] It is only the indirect effects of external or international legitimacy that may have an impact on the internal or domestic legitimacy of a given state, e.g. substantial inflows of aid from donors might allow governments to pursue policies that support the legitimacy of state institutions, or international legitimacy can be used against the aspirations of secessionist groups. In case of armed groups, similarly internal, domestic and international legitimacy can be at loggerheads with each other. As demonstrated earlier, outward looking groups tend to invest less energies in developing governance foundations, are likely to be more abusive in their relationships with civilians and could potentially fragment due to internal differences over pursuing external agendas.

Two important implications arise from armed group relations with external actors and for their international legitimacy. First the role of normative considerations in securing international legitimacy, and second, the role of political considerations in determining international legitimacy for armed groups. Turning to the normative criterion first. The international community judges groups such as the Islamic State and the Taliban as

illegitimate. This is due to a disagreement with the fundamental religious and cultural norms underpinning these movements, and also over the use of violence and terrorism to achieve goals. For example IS advocates a religious theocracy or Caliphate and does not adhere to the liberal concept of human rights. Its barbaric execution, oppression of women and forced conversion of Christians in Syria are some elements of dissonance with international liberal norms.

The challenge of finding reliable partners for countering groups such as IS, have made legitimacy considerations mired in political debates concerning terrorism. For example, during the recent Syria-Iraq crisis, Kurdish armed groups have been legitimate recipients of foreign support again undemocratic regimes in Libya, Iraq and Syria.[95] Kurdish armed formations including the *Peshmerga* affiliated with the Kurdistan Regional government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Worker's Party in Iraq (PKK), and the People's Protection Unit (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish armed faction, have been effective in the fight against Islamic State to varying degrees.[96] Groups such as the Peshmerga established humanitarian corridors enabling Yazidi civilians to escape the Islamic State. During August 2014, nearly 40,000 Yazidi minority populations were forced to flee to Mount Sinjar to escape an Islamic State advance. Other notable successes include the YPG taking control of border towns like Tel Ayad, and Kobane in northern Syria during 2015.[97]

Groups such as PKK and YPG have used protection of civilians, adherence to international humanitarian law (IHL), and cooperation with the United States in the counter-terrorism campaign against IS, to boost their international legitimacy. However different results are observable. International legitimacy has been more readily available for the YPG, the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) established in 2012 compared to the PKK, listed as a terrorist organisation. Close institutional links exist between the two groups.[98] The PKK was based in Syria from 1980s to late 1990s, supported by the Syrian government as a proxy to wage war on Turkey its regional competitor. In 1998, Syria recognized PKK as a terrorist organisation and imprisoned its leader Abdullah Ocalan. In October 2003, PKK reincarnated its Syrian branch as the Democratic Union Party (PYD).[99] The YPG refuses to acknowledge these relations to the PKK as part of its international image building and legitimacy seeking behavior and on paper the two groups are legally separate entities. In reality, the fluidity of fighter movements between PKK and YPG is a well-known fact along the front lines of Iraq and Syria. As a result, the PYD despite its close ties to the PKK, has been a legitimate recipient of US indirect military support in the counter-IS campaign on account of its not a terrorist group label. A situation has arisen where PKK combatants are terrorists when based in Turkey, Iran or Iraq but ally when based in Syria 'to counter IS'.[100]

Concluding Discussion

A relational approach offers key insights into the process of construction and deconstruction of armed group legitimacy vis-à-vis key domestic, national and international audiences. An analysis of community-armed group relationships enables a deeper understanding of how compliance relates to legitimacy. Voluntary compliance co-relates with higher levels of empirical, normative, domestic, and international legitimacy compared to quasi-voluntary and coercive forms. Relationships with the state were examined across a spectrum of collusive, conciliatory and conflicting interactions. Collusive relationships contribute to stability, and domestic legitimacy, but may prove destablising for internal legitimacy of armed groups. Conciliatory relationships between the state and armed group, strengthens empirical and normative legitimacy when there is normative congruence between the behavior of armed groups and their audiences. Conflictual relationships marked by high levels of state repression can strengthen civilian support and domestic legitimacy for armed groups. Battlefield losses and fragmentation, under targeted attacks from the State military or its allies can weaken internal cohesion of an armed group. Fragmentation is found to be detrimental to international legitimacy and support.

In conclusion, both domestic and international legitimacy across empirical and normative dimensions are critical for the legitimacy of armed groups. In current scenarios such as Syria and Iraq, extreme fragmentation presents important challenges to the process of legitimacy formation. Armed groups are emerging both the targets of state attacks as well as partners in counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency. As a result formulaic approaches to legitimacy are difficult to implement. A relational approach offers flexibility in analyzing the important relationships and how these shape legitimacy over time. Empirical legitimacy appears to be the most critical factor in moving armed groups closer to normative legitimacy and gradual behavioral adjustments to secure international legitimacy. While traditionally secessionist groups have pursued international legitimacy more robustly compared to revolutionary groups, the present landscape blurs such distinctions. Armed groups operating across Syria and Iraq and Libya draw on a mix of revolutionary and secessionist characteristics. To discern the legitimacy of such groups the relational approach developed in this research will be instructive.

Notes

[1] Della Porta, *Terror against the State*, 209.

[2] Schlichte and Schneckener, *Politics of Legitimacy*, 409-424.

[3] Somers, *Constitution of Identity*, 605–649; Emirbayer, *Relational Sociology*, 281–317; Tilly, *Politics of Collective Violence*; Nexon, *Relationalism*, 99-126; Jackson and Nexon, *Relations before States*, 291–332.

[4] Wesley, *State of the Art*, 369–385; Eriksen and Sending, *Seeing Beyond the State*; Andersen, *Legitimacy in State- Building*, 205-219.

[5] Suchman, *Managing Legitimacy*, 575.

[6] Andersen, note 4 above; Lemay-Hébert, *Statebuilding*, 21-45.

[7] While the relationship between armed group and other violent non-state actors is important towards the overall success of a rebel movement, it is less relevant from a legitimacy standpoint and falls outside the scope of the current piece.

[8] Walzer, *The Moral Standing of States*, 209–229.

[9] Beetham, *The legitimacy of power*.

[10] Blau, *A formal theory*, 201-218.

[11] Lund, *Twilight institutions*, 685-705.

[12] Kasfir, *Guerrilla Governance*, 281.

[13] Arjona, *Civilian Resistance*.

[14] Hofmann, *Myths set in motion*, 160.

[15] Kalyvas, 'Microlevel Studies of Violence in Civil War, 658-668.

[16] Malthaner, *Violence, Legitimacy, and Control*, 427.

[17] Lecomte-Tilouine, *Terror in a Maoist Model village*, 383.

[18] ibid, 383-384.

[19] McCullough, *The legitimacy of states*.

[20] The Guardian, *Mosul One Year on*.

[21] Ibid.

[22] ibid.

[23] Schlichte and Schneckener, *Politics of Legitimacy*, 409-424.

[24] Sarkar and Sarkar. *The Rebels' Resource Curse*, 1-29.

[25] Weinstein, *Inside rebellion*.

[26] Chesterman, *Civilians in War*, 34; Barbelet, *Protection Crisis*.

[27] Hendrie, *Now the people*.

[28] See note 23 above, 410.

[29] See note 13.

[30] Mampilly, *Insurgent Governance*.

[31] See note 13.

[32] Salehyan et al., *External support*, 709-744.

[33] See note 13 above.

[34] See note 12 above.

[35] Willms, *Justice through Armed Groups*, 23-24.

[36] Levi and Sacks, *Legitimating beliefs*, 314.

[37] See note 12 above.

[38] Hansen, *Al Shabaab in Somalia*.

[39] See note 16, 433.

[40] See note 14, 161.

[41] Unsworth, *The state's legitimacy*.

[42] Schlichte, *Shadow of violence*, 49.

[43] Hangzo and Kaur, *Progovernment armed groups*.

[44] Hazen, *gangs as armed groups,* 369-386; Kingsbury, *Power politics*, 219-223.

[45] See note 11, 677.

[46] Olson, *Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development*, 567-576.

[47] Förster, *Maintenant, on sait qui est qui*, 699-722.

[48] Mampilly, *Rebel rulers.*

[49] Migdal and Schlichte, *Rethinking the state*, 14-15.

[50] Policzer, *Non-State Armed Groups*, 12; Kalyvas, *The logic of violence*, 216.

[51] Allen and Reid, *Justice at the margins*,106-123.

[52] Pratten, *The politics of vigilance*, 707-734; Buur, *Democracy & its discontents*, 571-584.

[53] Bakonyi and Stuvøy, *Violence & social order*, 374.

[54] See note 12, 3.

[55] Tull, *A reconfiguration of political order?*, 429-446.

[56] Reno, *Warlord politics and African states*, 227.

[57] Jaquier, *The Islamic State*.

[58] Ayoob, *The Myth of the Islamic Sate*.

[59] Jenkins, *Opposed to the Islamic State*.

[60] Staniland, *States, insurgents and wartime political orders*, 243-264.

[61] North, *Limited access orders.*

[62] Snyder, *Does lootable wealth breed disorder*, 943-968.

[63] Brenner, *Ashes of co-optation*, 337; Smith, *Myanmar*.

[64] Meehan, *Drugs, insurgency and state-building*, 388-389.

[65] See note 63 above, 339.

[66] Sheppard, *What the Syrian Kurds have Wrought*.

[67] Munive and Somer, *Protection of civilians,*10-13.

[68] Verweijen, *Stable instability*, 7-10

[69] Ibid.

[70] Toros, *We don't negotiate*, 413.

[71] Aronson et al., *How Rebels Win*.

[72] Balcells and Kalyvas, *Revolutionary Rebels*.

[73] Bhattacharya, *Strategic Interaction*, 574-575.

[74] Carey and Mitchell, *Pro-Government Militias and conflict*.

[75] Jentzsch et al., *Militias in Civil Wars*, 755-769.

[76]Carey et al., *Monopoly of violence*, 250.

[77]Lyall, *Are co-ethnics more effective*, 1-20.

[78] See note 74 above.

[79] Mitchell et al., *Pro-government militias*, 812-836.

[80] Berti, *Rebel politics*, 118-136.

[81] Al- Hawat and Elhamoui, *Civilian interaction*.

[82] ibid.

[83] Cunningham et al., *It Takes Two*, 570-597.

[84] Salehyan et al., *External rebel sponsorship*, 633-661.

[85] Salehyan et al., *Explaining external support*, 709-744.

[86] Ibid.

[87] See note 2 above.

[88] Lasley and Thyne, *Secession, legitimacy*, 289-308.

[89] Regan, *Third-party interventions*, 55-73; Heger et al., *Ruthless rulers*, 385-403; Cunningham, *Blocking resolution*, 115-127.

[90] Reyntjens, *Second Congo War*, 220.

[91] See note 68 above.

[92] Bellina et al., *Legitimacy of the State*, 36.

[93] Jones et al., *Concepts and Dilemmas*, 17.

[94] Ibid., 25.

[95] Thornton, *The Kurds as Proxies*.

[96] ibid.

[97] ibid

[98] Munive and Somer, *Counter-terrorism and the protection of civilians*, 28-30.

[99] ibid.

[100] ibid.

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