The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes

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Abstract: The proliferation of irregular armed actors which defy simplistic definition has caught public and academic attention alike, not least in the pages of this journal. To move the debate on non-state armed groups (NSAGs) forward, this article seeks to enhance our conceptual understanding of parochial armed groups which are not primarily driven by ideological or religious objectives. Thus, this article clarifies similarities as well as differences between subtypes of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) on the one hand, and between CBAGs and other NSAGs, on the other hand. By doing so, a typology is developed that classifies militias, gangs and vigilantes on the basis of their political, economic and security-related dimensions. The resulting ideal types are discussed through the lenses of different explanatory frameworks and policy debates in the field of contemporary security studies. A major typological issue is the tendency for CBAGs to 'turn bad' and become threats to the stability they were expected to transform, becoming a serious problem in countries where they operate. It is concluded that the challenge of CBAGs ultimately needs to be addressed by putting in place a functioning state that can tackle the underlying woes that led to their proliferation in the first place.

Introduction

A decade ago, an urgently needed debate about the changing nature of warfare and the role of non-state armed groups (NSAGs) emerged on the pages of Contemporary Security Policy. The 2005 symposium on Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) discussed how political, economic, social and technical change brought about new forms of war, in which the state's monopoly on the use of force has increasingly been eroded.[1] The most important challenge posed by 4GW is the proliferation of 'non-state actors who increasingly seem to control initiative over the use of violence, its intensity and duration'.[2] Moreover, 4GW is characterized by what Krause termed 'hybrid violence', which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish between combatants and civilians, between criminal and political motives, and between conflict, post-conflict, and non-conflict armed violence.[3] In this respect, a 2009 special issue of Contemporary Security Policy shifted the debate on NSAGs beyond politically motivated insurgents and terrorists towards groups with more parochial objectives, such as militias, gangs and vigilantes. This theme has equally been explored in a subsequent article by Podder, who offered a useful distinction between community-based and capital-based armed groups.[4]

The relevance and urgency of better understanding such groups has been substantiated over the last couple of years by the explosion of NSAGs in all parts of the world—be they pro-Russian separatists engaging the Armed Forces of Ukraine in eastern parts of the country, anti-balaka vigilantes combating Séléka rebels in Central African Republic, self-defence forces fighting against drug cartels in Mexico, Boko Haram wreaking havoc on civilians in northern Nigeria and neighbouring countries, or private armed groups and terrorists operating on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. While all these examples claim to be fighting for a political project or the common good of their community, they have been found to be primarily motivated by narrow interests.

Yet, despite abundant contemporary examples of such parochial armed groups driven by rent-seeking behaviour and increasing academic interest in these groups, they have not yet been thoroughly conceptualized. This is mainly due to the fact that the vast majority of attention—both scholarly and otherwise—has been given to ideologically motivated rebels during much of the 20th century, and subsequently to religiously motivated terrorists, since militant Islamism replaced the Cold War-era spectre of communism as the most urgent threat to international security on 11 September. What is more, there is a lack of understanding the transformation such groups tend to undergo in the course of their existence. Thus, the aim of this article is to bring forward the debate by proposing a typological conceptualization of community-based armed groups (CBAGs)—an underexplored subtype of NSAGs—as well as their transformed counterparts.

Differentiating CBAGs from NSAGs and discerning different types of CBAGs entails important implications for policy-makers. While politically motivated rebels might be turned into functioning political parties adhering to democratic principles, this is not an option for parochial CBAGs without any tangible political aims whatsoever, apart from self-enrichment and financially contingent support for their political sponsor. At the same time, unrestricted use of force—as to some extent employed in the War on Terror—can have adverse effects when utilized against CBAGs, as indiscriminate violence risks further alienating marginalized communities from the state. Ultimately, more so than in the case of other NSAGs, the only viable solution to the problem posed by CBAGs lies in building democratic, accountable, and equally developed states bound by and enforcing the rule of law. Yet, this is a notoriously lengthy and complicated process, notably in countries plagued by one or another type of CBAGs.

Community-Based Armed Groups and Non-State Armed Groups

Literature on non-state armed groups (NSAGs) often appears over-inclusive, at the expense of analytical clarity. For instance, one particularly wide-ranging categorization includes no less than eight types of armed non-state actors: (1) Rebels and guerrillas; (2) militias and paramilitaries; (3) clan chiefs and big men; (4) warlords; (5) terrorists; (6) criminals, mafia and gangs; (7) mercenaries, private military companies (PMCs) and private security companies (PSCs); (8) marauders and 'sobels'.[5] More commonly used is a five-fold typology of NSAGs that differentiates roughly

between criminals, warlords, terrorists, insurgents, and mercenaries.[6] Studies using such a broad typology include cases as varied as the Islamist militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Japanese Mafia, the transnational criminal gang *Mara Salvatrucha*, the Irish Republican Army and the South African PMC Executive Outcomes.[7] To
95 avoid analytical inconsistencies stemming from too broad categorizations, this study focuses on community-based armed groups (CBAGs), which are conceptualized as a subtype of the broader category of NSAGs. Two criteria for exclusion and one criterion for inclusion have been identified to differentiate between CBAGs and NSAGs.
100 First of all, making a distinction between formal and informal armed groups appears more appropriate than the habitual state/non-state divide. This is because CBAGs are regularly sponsored or even created by state actors, but usually not formally established or regulated by law.[8] Therefore, the category of CBAGs excludes formal NSAGs such as PSCs and PMCs, which have only recently been included in
105 typologies of NSAGs. A decade ago, Mair as well as Shultz *et al*. identified four ideal types of NSAGs—warlords/militias, rebels/insurgents, terrorists, and organized criminals.[9] While this basic differentiation is roughly mirrored in more recent studies, mercenaries are now regularly added as a fifth category to account for the surge in PSCs and PMCs.[10] In a few cases, however, the boundary between formal
110 security companies and informal armed groups is blurred. In Nairobi's Kibera slum, for example, a former police officer told me that he employs members of local vigilante groups in his PSC on behalf of small businesses as a way to monitor their conduct and to prevent extortion.[11] Another borderline case is Haiti, where industrialists hire CBAGs to provide security for factories which are located
115 within or in close proximity to gang-controlled areas.[12]
   Secondly, the category of CBAGs excludes politically motivated NSAGs like insurgents and terrorists. Such groups are above all else ideologically or religiously driven, strive to disrupt public order to further their political cause, and aspire to take over the state in order to establish another political system. CBAGs, by contrast,
120 do not primarily pursue a political mission. If CBAGs are pulled into the political sphere, they act on behalf of political entrepreneurs who might also happen to be leaders of such groups. In these cases, political aims are parochial in nature and limited to the ambitions of local strongmen in their community. Concerning national politics, CBAGs are if anything hired as armed wing of political parties, thus advan-
125 cing their economic interests rather than a political platform. That being said, CBAGs have to be differentiated from peaceful and unarmed grassroots movements with a genuine political agenda, often referred to as community-based organizations or civil society organizations. Drawing this distinction is often a difficult endeavour because social movements whose demands cannot be channelled peacefully into
130 the political system may decide to take up arms.[13] Moreover, CBAGs can masquerade as non-governmental organizations in order to position themselves as de facto liaison between their communities and international agencies, as I witnessed in Haiti.[14] In addition, two qualifications have to be made regarding the exclusion of politically motivated rebels and terrorist groups.

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To begin with, a number of scholars have incorporated equivalents of CBAGs in their typology of rebel groups, even though admitting that these subtypes do not strictly qualify as rebels. By way of example, in his seminal study, *African Guerrillas*, Clapham distinguished between liberation insurgencies, separatist insurgencies, reform insurgencies, and warlord insurgencies.[15] This categorization has been broadly adopted by Reno, who adds 'pariochial rebels' as a fifth category of rebels in Africa.[16] However, warlords and 'parochial rebels' are hardly comparable to other types of insurgents who seek to overthrow the state in order to radically alter its territory or political system. Quite the contrary, 'the emergence of warlord and parochial rebels overwhelms and undermines the efforts of ideologues [and] their vision of armed rebellion'.[17] In contrast to anti-colonial rebels who fought for independence, separatist insurgencies who fought for secession, or reform rebels who fought for revolutionary change, warlords seek 'a change of leadership which does not entail the creation of a state any different from that which it seeks to overthrow'.[18] Parochial rebels, in turn, fight 'to protect themselves from the corruption of the state and the predators around them, instead of capturing the states like their warlord counterparts'.[19] Indeed, Reno's concept of parochial rebels, 'who fight to protect circumscribed communities [and] face obligations to heed the interests of their community backers', is the closest equivalent to CBAGs in the literature on NSAGs.[20]

The second qualification regarding the exclusion of terrorists and insurgencies concerns the use of the label 'terrorist'.[21] With the shift from the Cold War to the War on Terror, the main focus of attention in the literature on NSAGs switched from rebel groups to terrorist groups.[22] Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, the term 'terrorism' has been used almost exclusively to describe acts of terror committed by religious fundamentalists, more particularly militant Islamist groups.[23] Such religious extremist groups, which are the primary object of investigation in the contemporary field of terrorism studies, are excluded from the category of CBAGs. However, it has to be stressed that '[t]errorism is above all a *tool* or, if you will, a *technique* [that] is as old as warfare itself'.[24] From this perspective, armed groups are not automatically excluded from the category of CBAGs just because they engage in terroristic acts, which are defined as politically motivated, clandestine attacks on civilians in order to instil fear in a larger target audience.[25] In fact, such acts are routinely committed by a number of armed groups that are not usually categorized as terrorists, such as militias in the African Great Lakes region or criminal gangs in Central America.[26]

The most important criterion for including NSAGs into the category of CBAGs is their eponymous embeddedness within the community in which they emerge. The boundaries of the community can be defined (1) by territory—such as an urban neighbourhood or a village; (2) by blood ties—as in a family or clan; or (3) by a shared identity—like in the case of ethnic groups. Whatever the nature of their community, its demarcation limits the reach of CBAGs. This means that CBAGs do not seek to take over the state, even though they may be instrumentalized or hired by national political actors in order to defend or topple a regime. Hence, the community that serves as referent object for CBAGs is by definition incongruent with the nation state. Rather, the community is a localized subunit of the nation; in some cases, it transcends state boundaries. This is in contrast to Anderson's concept of 'imagined

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a militia, or as a gang. First of all, when the security dimension is most pronounced, a CBAG belongs to the category of vigilante groups, which is subdivided into crime-control groups, self-defence forces, and—in the transformed form—para-states. Second, when the political dimension of a CBAG is most prominent, it may be classified as an ethnic or popular militia, or—in its transformed type—as a form of warlordism. Third and lastly, CBAGs whose economic dimension stands out can be categorized as a criminal gang, a youth gang, or—in its transformed type—as a criminal fiefdom.

In other words, each dimension corresponds with a different ideal type of CBAGs; and each ideal type includes two subtypes and one transformed type. Moreover, each ideal type is typically analysed through different explanatory frames and highlighted in different policy debates. Vigilantes are most commonly analysed through the framework of state failure and underlined in debates on ungoverned spaces. Militias, by contrast, are mostly discussed as part of the debates about new wars and new barbarism; and tend to be investigated through the lens of patronage and clientelism. Lastly, gangs are sought to be explained by notions of criminality and delinquency, and feature prominently in greed-versus-grievance debates. It is important to note that the nomenclature of ideal types as well as the corresponding explanatory frames and policy debates are employed in a highly stylized manner, meaning that the real-life examples presented in this article are by necessity much messier than any heuristically informed typology could account for.

For over time, one ideal type might not only evolve into a transformed type, but can also turn into another ideal type as soon as a different dimension becomes dominant. Moreover, most CBAGs fulfil criteria of multiple ideal types simultaneously. Thus, classifying an armed group can provide only a momentary snapshot of which dimension constitutes currently the predominant feature. This is due to the fact that the concept of CBAGs is inherently blurry, fluid, and dynamic. Ogada and Mue confirm with reference to CBAGs in Kenya that '[v]igilantes can turn into gangs and gangs can turn into armed militia'.[32] Thus, as with virtually all typologies, in reality, the distinction between the ideal types is blurred and hardly any CBAG can be permanently allocated to one category exclusively. In this respect, Weber wrote that ideal types are:

> . . . formed by a one-sided *accentuation* of one or several perspectives, and through the synthesis of a variety of diffuse, discrete, *individual* phenomena, present sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes not at all; subsumed by such one-sided, emphatic viewpoints so that they form a uniform construction *in thought*. In its conceptual purity this construction can never be found in reality, it is a *utopia*.[33]

Vigilantes

The first ideal type of community-based armed groups refers to groups that are engaged in different types of vigilantism. Vigilante groups are defined either as 'citizens who organize themselves into groups to take the law into their own hands

TABLE 2
EXPLANATORY FRAMES FOR IDEAL TYPES OF CBAGS.

Dimension	Security		Political		Economic	
Ideal type	Vigilantes		Militias		Gangs	
Framework	State fragility/failure		Patronage/clientelism		Criminality/delinquency	
Policy debate	Ungoverned spaces		New wars/barbarism		Greed versus grievance	
Subtypes	Anti-crime groups	Self-defence groups	Ethnic militia	Popular militia	Youth gang	Criminal gang
Examples of subtypes	Bakassi Boys, Nigeria	Self-defence Forces, Mexico	*Mungiki,* Kenya	*Colectivos*, Venezuela	*Pandillas*, Nicaragua	*Maras*, Honduras
Transf. type	Para-state		Warlord state		Criminal fiefdom	
Examples	AUC, Colombia		Taylorland, Liberia		*Comando Vermelho*, Rio	

in order to reprimand criminals',[34] or as 'associations in which citizens have joined together for self-protection under conditions of disorder'.[35] Consequently, the purpose of vigilantism can be subdivided in 'crime control and/or social control' directed at members of the own community,[36] and in measures to defend the community against external threats.[37] Ideal-typical vigilantes can be distinguished from militias and gangs, in that their primary function is providing security, rather than pursuing their political or economic interests. In reality, however, vigilantes have a tendency to transform into militias and gangs;[38] or, as Rodgers has it, to 'turn bad'.[39] In its transformed version, vigilantes can turn into 'para-states'—paramilitaries who establish their own fiefdom in which they 'operate as the functional equivalents of states'.[40]

Classical examples of crime-control groups include People Against Gangsterism and Drugs in South Africa's Cape Flats, the Bakassi Boys in south-eastern Nigeria, and a plethora of small vigilante groups in the slums of big cities in Kenya.[41] In Mexico, by contrast, farmers and former soldiers formed typical self-defence groups to take back cities and regions under the control of drug cartels, whereas similar groups called 'arrow boys' have formed in South Sudan in order to protect their villages against Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army.[42] Concerning the transformed type of vigilantes, Colombian paramilitary groups such as the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* and an affiliate called *Bloque Cacique Nutibara* transformed from defensive vigilantes into offensive 'para-states' with political ambitions. In contrast to the ideal-typical crime-control and self-defence vigilantes, they pose a direct challenge to national security as they commit acts of 'violence that [are] deliberately intended to destabilize the state itself'.[43]

State Fragility

The Kenyan and South Sudanese cases provides textbook examples of the emergence of vigilantism in the context of state fragility, whereas the formation of self-defence forces in Mexico and of paramilitaries in Colombia shows that vigilantism can also be found in relatively strong and viable modern states.[44] Nevertheless, vigilantes tend to be associated with state fragility, as vigilantism is commonly attributed to a 'state's apparent inability to deal effectively with [. . .] theft and other crime'.[45] From this point of view, 'vigilantism is likely to occur when the state is unable or unwilling to fulfil its part of the social contract'.[46] The failure or collapse of the 'Westphalian system of Weberian states' since the end of the Cold War has resulted in the state's loss over the 'monopoly on the legitimate means of violence'.[47] In this respect, numerous studies have shown how non-state armed groups take over state security functions in fragile states[48] and how international interventions attempt to restore the state's monopoly over the use of violence.[49]

However, a growing number of scholars criticize the very concept of state fragility as conceptually flawed, historically ill-informed and culturally biased towards the ideal type of liberal Western democracies.[50] Despite this criticism, scholarship on state fragility has greatly influenced policies towards states deemed 'failed' or 'fragile'. Top diplomats stressed 'the importance of dealing with the problem of failed and failing states'[51] because they were seen as posing 'one of the most

important foreign policy challenges of the contemporary era'.[52] Particularly in the wake of 9/11, security circles became increasingly concerned with the perceived risks posed by 'ungoverned spaces',[53] within which '[t]errorism finds sanctuary', in the words of—then future and now former—US Secretary of Defense Chuck
365 Hagel.[54] More recently, the concept of fragility has been applied to urban areas, resulting in an emerging body of literature on so-called 'fragile' or 'feral' cities.[55] For some analysts, fragile cities—which 'can exist in weak or strong states'—are 'the new frontier of "ungoverned" spaces' and pose an even greater security challenge than failed states.[56]

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Alternatively Governed Spaces

Yet, regardless whether ostensibly 'ungoverned' spaces are located in rural or urban environments, it has been shown that they are in fact under control of 'alternative authority and governance structures'.[57] Thus, it is more accurate to talk about
375 'areas of limited statehood'[58] and 'under- (or alternatively) governed spaces'.[59] In this respect, it has been argued that the loss of the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of violence does not lead to 'polypolies of violence' that would be characterized by anarchy and a Hobbesian 'war of all against all'.[60] Rather, this loss leads to 'oligopolies of violence' which are made up of 'a fluctuating number of partly compet-
380 ing, partly co-operating actors of violence of different quality'.[61] Since state fragility is associated with a rise in criminal violence, citizens are said to 'naturally turn to warlords and other strong figures who [are] offering the possibility of security at a time when all else, and the state itself, is crumbling'.[62]

However, not all citizens are equally affected by the state's inability to provide
385 security.[63] Those living in the most affluent parts of the main cities often enjoy functioning protection by police and private security firms, while those living in neglected areas are denied access to formal security systems.[64] This 'duality of rich and poor' is reinforced by rapid urbanization, which triggers primarily the growth of informal settlements.[65] It has even been argued that the withdrawal of the state in selected
390 localities is a deliberate political choice, amounting to 'state abandonment' rather than state failure.[66] On top of that, many governments accept informal security providers as a 'cheap form of law enforcement' for the poorer sections of society.[67] This is most evident in cases where informal 'violence specialists' are employed by state actors to carry out the 'dirty work' in undergoverned areas.[68] All in all, residents in
395 fragile states and so-called 'ungoverned spaces' are caught between the violence of corrupt and repressive state security forces, on the one hand, and 'parallel power systems' imposed by community-based armed groups, on the other hand.[69]

Militias
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According to Weber, 'the legitimacy of an order may be guaranteed or upheld in two principal ways', which operate complementary rather than exclusionary: First, through ulterior self-interest; second, through 'purely disinterested motives'.[70] When applied to community-based armed groups (CBAGs), the first way corresponds
405 to the profit orientation of militias who, as clients, are paid by their political patrons.

The second way concerns the interest of the patron 'to establish and to cultivate the belief in its "legitimacy"'.[71] The belief in the legitimacy of an authority may be based upon tradition, upon affectual attitudes, upon its legality, or upon the 'rational belief in its absolute values'.[72] In countries where the private sphere is de facto separated from the public sphere, the last two elements, united as legal-rational authority, relate to regular armed forces: soldiers ideally do not only work for salary, but strongly believe in the absolute value and legality of their state's formal military structure. CBAGs, by contrast, obey their patrons when the latter base their claims to legitimacy either on traditional grounds—in the case of neopatrimonialism—or on charismatic grounds—in the case of populism.[73]

When embarking on a neopatrimonial strategy, patrons evoke notions of ethnicity or clan-based identity in order to legitimize their authority vis-à-vis their clients, including ethnic militias.[74] The term neopatrimonialism derives from Weber's concept of patrimonialism, which relates to his traditional type of domination.[75] What is new about neopatrimonialism is the combination of a patrimonial logic found in traditional societies and a legal-rational, bureaucratic logic found in modern states.[76] Médard makes clear, however, that rather than constituting an 'anachronical, historical survival', the evocation of kinship or ethnicity can be 'considered as an artificial by-product of clientelist strategies used by political leaders to create a following'.[77]

A similar strategy can be observed in the case of populist patrons, who evoke the image of a common enemy of the excluded masses in order to legitimize their authority vis-à-vis their clients, including popular militias. While ethnicity is hardly a fixed or 'primordial' element, it provides nevertheless for a considerably more stable support base than that of populist leaders. In order to compensate for the fluid and hardly institutionalized base of followers, populists claim legitimacy on the basis of Weber's charismatic authority.[78] This strategy has proved particularly successful in times of political crises and economic decay, during which large parts of the population feel marginalized or excluded and are receptive to the promises of self-declared saviours.[79] Thus, populism can be defined as 'the top-down political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge elite groups on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo, or "the people"'.[80]

Subtypes of Militias

Considering that the obedience of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) to their patrons is based both on self-interest and on either traditional authority or charismatic authority, I distinguish between two subtypes of militias: First, ethnic militias; second, popular militias. While both subtypes are tied to their political patrons by way of a self-interested clientelistic relationship, the legitimacy for this relationship is based on populism in the case of popular militias, and on neopatrimonialism in the case of ethnic militias. In both cases, the breakdown of the clientelist foundation of the political system can lead to the rise of warlordism.[81] In the framework of CBAGs, warlords are defined as the transformed type of militias. Warlords assume de facto control over territory, in which they establish state-like structures and dominate the local population through popular or ethnic militias.[82] In order to tie militias to

themselves, warlords pay financial rewards and claim legitimacy on the basis of traditional or charismatic authority. In this regard, Marten underlines that a warlord's 'authority is based on charisma and patronage ties to their followers', while Bøås and Jennings point out that neopatrimonialism can provide warlords with ideational legitimacy.[83]

Archetypal ethnic militias can be found in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where *Mai-Mai* formed in order to defend their 'autochthonous' communities from a 'foreign' invasion.[84] Another typical case is the South Sudanese 'white army' (*jiech mabor*), which comprises village youths that are loosely connected by ethnic ties to Riek Machar, the former Vice President who currently leads the opposition forces in the civil war against President Salva Kiir.[85] Popular militias, by contrast, are represented by Jean-Bertrand Aristide's *baz* or *chimères* in Haiti, as well as by Hugo Chávez' *colectivos* or *Círculos Bolivarianos* in Venezuela.[86] The paradigmatic example of a transformed type of militia can be found in Liberia, where the National Patriotic Front of Liberia—led by the archetypical warlord Charles Taylor—controlled as much as 90 per cent of the territory, consequently dubbed 'Greater Liberia' or 'Taylorland'.[87]

How does our categorization in two subtypes and one transformed type relate to existing scholarship on militias? There is a tendency in the literature to subsume vigilante groups and militias into one and the same category. For instance, Ero suggests that vigilante groups, civil defence forces and party militias drive the 'militianisation of war and security in Africa',[88] whereas Raleigh includes local security providers in her typology of militias—in addition to emergency militias and competition militias that are used for political purposes.[89] However, this understanding of militias as a non-state provider of security is based on what Francis termed 'First Generation' conceptualization of militias.[90] 'Second Generation' militias, by contrast, 'could be categorised as state or government sponsored'.[91] Contrary to vigilante groups that mimic the state in its absence, the 'relationship with the state is imperative' for militias.[92]

Furthermore, it is common to classify militias based on their type of relationship to the current government.[93] This becomes problematic, however, if only groups with affiliation to the party in power are considered militias, while opposition-aligned CBAGs are classified instead as 'counterstate actors'.[94] For instance, a database on pro-government militias lists the 'Chimeres [*sic*] AKA Popular Organisations' in Haiti as having dissolved on 1 March 2004.[95] Yet, this categorization seems to miss the point, considering that the groups have been most active *after* 2004 and are up to this date a main concern for MINUSTAH and national politics.[96] Moreover, this classification does not take into consideration the fact that a number of these groups have been, and still are, opportunistically fighting both on the side of the government and on the side of the opposition.[97] Furthermore, in Congo-Brazzaville and Jamaica, to give just two examples, the main political parties each have their own youth wings which are firmly rooted in different marginalized neighbourhoods of the capital, regardless of which party is currently holding the government.[98]

Therefore, it appears more useful to focus on the fact that a militia acts on behalf of a political actor, disregarding of the fact whether the latter is currently in power.

A more important factor is the nature of the relationship between militias and their patrons. In this respect, building on a typology first brought forward by Hills, Jackson differentiates between three types of militias on the basis of their respective leaders: First of all, the economically motivated 'freelance militias' are led by a 'gang leader' and constitute the 'least disciplined, least trained' subtype of militias.[99] Secondly, the more political 'clan militias' are tied to a 'chief' or 'traditional leader' of their own clan or ethnic group. Lastly, 'personal militias', which operate at the behest of warlords, are seen as a '"higher" political organisation' compared to the other two subtypes. This categorization seems more compatible with the categorization we developed within the framework of CBAGs.[100]

New Barbarism and New Wars

Warlords such as Charles Taylor were regularly portrayed as 'mindless barbarians bent on dragging the population that lived in the areas they controlled back to a dark age of tribalism'.[101] The 'barbarism, savagery, and "senseless" acts of violence'[102] associated with warlords have largely been linked to their mobilization of the 'lumpen proletariat' made up of 'alienated youth' and 'other low status individuals'.[103] In an article widely circulated in diplomatic and foreign policy circles, Kaplan warned that 'hordes [of] young men with restless, scanning eyes' in West Africa, who are floating 'like loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid […] on the verge of igniting', give 'an eerie taste of what American cities might be like in the future'.[104] Civil wars, most notably those in Africa, have long been associated with highest levels of cruelty and barbarity, especially when contrasted to seemingly more 'modern' inter-state wars characterized by the use of sophisticated technology and a clear distinction between combatants and civilians.[105]

The evocation of Malthusian fears of 'disease, overpopulation, unprovoked crime, [and] scarcity of resources' is not limited to African civil wars, though. In the face of media-savvy drug cartels combining extreme brutality with the 'instrumental use of narcocultura', Mexico analysts have posed the question: 'To what extent will this new barbarism and depravity go?'[106] Likewise, Rapley interprets the rise of 'gang-controlled neighborhoods' across Latin America and the Caribbean as evidence of a 'new medievalism' in which the West should keep 'barbarian tribes' at bay in order to avoid the fate of decay experienced by the Roman Empire.[107] However, Chabal and Daloz and Keen point out that underneath the extreme brutality, societal divisions are instrumentalized by rational political entrepreneurs.[108] Consequently, the authors reject the idea that 'ancient' ethnic or tribal hatreds incomprehensibly or inevitably erupt in irrational and barbaric 'acts of degrading brutishness'.[109] Likewise, Richards criticizes the new barbarism thesis as biologically and environmentally deterministic as well as culturally essentialist.[110] From his point of view, terror tactics employed in Sierra Leone's civil war have been 'devilishly well-calculated', rather than being representative of an 'essential African savagery' or an 'irrationality of violence'.[111]

The strategic use of terror to sow fear and hatred as employed by West African warlords or Mexican drug lords is a fundamental characteristics of so-called 'new wars'.[112] In addition to this changed mode of warfare, 'new wars' can be

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distinguished from 'old wars' in terms of their goals, which 'are about identity politics in contrast to the geo-political or ideological goals of earlier wars', and in terms of their financial sustenance, which depends on a criminalized and globalized war economy.[113] A hugely influential concept, the new wars thesis has been criticized on methodological and conceptual grounds.[114] The concept has come under scrutiny regarding its claims about the central role of globalization.[115] Similar questions concern to what degree today's conflicts actually differ from earlier ones.[116] Yet, Kaldor responded to critics that despite obvious continuities from 'old' to 'new' wars, the main objective of the distinction is to show policy-makers the inexpediency of treating new wars 'as anarchy, barbarism, ancient rivalries, where the best policy response is containment, i.e. protecting the borders of the West from this malady'.[117] Thus, even though the supposed 'new barbarism' is commonly attributed to the emergence of 'new wars', the most important advocate of the new wars concept clearly distances herself from the new barbarism thesis.

Gangs

Perhaps the most central argument of the new wars thesis is that violent conflicts are increasingly depoliticized and instead more and more driven by economic incentives.[118] The question whether economic or political motivation is more important has been debated around the dichotomy of greed versus grievance as the driving factor for joining and sustaining rebel groups. Arguably, the most influential work in this field has been conducted by Paul Collier and fellow World Bank economists, who argue that '[c]onflicts are far more likely to be caused by economic opportunities than by grievance'.[119] The emphasis on greed is such that rebellion is presented as 'a distinctive form of organized crime', while grievance is downplayed as a 'discourse' brought forward to 'justify their actions in terms of ethnic, religious, or class divisions'.[120] While most work on economic incentives in civil wars emphasized the role of lootable resources such as 'conflict minerals' in sustaining rebellions,[121] the greed model can equally be applied to explain the involvement of gangs in criminal activities such as kidnapping and drug trafficking.[122]

Despite its considerable impact on policy-making, Collier's greed thesis has been criticized on theoretical, methodological as well as conceptual grounds. Theoretically, neoclassical rational choice theories of war and conflict have been rejected as 'reductionist, speculative, and misleading'.[123] Most prominently, the expedience of using statistical correlations from large-N quantitative studies to explain the motivations of individual fighters has been questioned.[124] Furthermore, a number of methodological concerns have been raised, for instance, relating to sample size and coding issues.[125] Finally, Cramer objects to the dualistic conceptualization of greed and grievance as opposing poles, despite evidence that they are 'inextricably linked'.[126]

Dialectically bringing together both greed- and grievance-accentuating theories, numerous authors qualified the impact of economic factors, stressing that social, political and security dynamics are equally important to explain violent conflicts.[127] In this respect, Ballentine and Sherman argue that 'conceptualizing explanations of

armed conflict in terms of greed or grievance has imposed an unnecessarily limiting dichotomy on what is, in reality, a highly diverse, complex set of incentive and opportunity structures that vary across time and location'.[128] Thus, a multi-causal explanatory framework is best suited to analyse complex phenomena such as community-based armed groups (CBAGs), which have a political, economic and security dimension. Applying Clausewitzian terms to our typology of CBAGs, one could say that militias are used for the continuation of politics by other means, vigilantes carry out the continuation of security by other means, and gangs engage in the 'continuation of economics by other means'.[129]

Subtypes of Gangs

Many gangs around the world fulfil a political dimension and have historically been used 'as the pliant tools of corrupt, powerful city players of machine politics'.[130] In the conceptual framework of community-based armed groups (CBAGs), however, the political dimension is already contained in the ideal-typical militia, while the criminal dimension of CBAGs corresponds with the ideal type of gangs. This is in line with conventional criminological research, according to which 'involvement in illegal activity' is an essential part of the definition of gangs.[131] For analytical purposes, we distinguish between two subtypes of gangs, which are characterized by differing forms of criminal behaviour. The first subtype is youth gangs, which are conventionally associated with a subculture of juvenile delinquency rather than with for-profit organized criminality. The members of youth gangs are expected to grow out of deviant behaviour when reaching maturity.[132] The second subtype are the more organized and institutionalized criminal gangs, which include members of various age cohorts and are, at least from the point of view of law enforcement, committed to profit-generating criminal activities.[133] Each subtype can be traced back to one particular school of gang research—the ecological approach or the rational choice approach.

To begin with, the ideal-typical youth gangs are characteristic of the ecological approach, which emphasizes the impact of cultural and societal influences on juveniles. In this tradition, gangs are defined as 'unsupervised peer groups who are socialized by the streets rather than by conventional institutions'.[134] In his seminal work, *The Gang*, which is generally considered to be the first comprehensive study on the subject, Thrasher positioned the source for criminal motivation on the societal level.[135] In the tradition of the human ecology approach of the Chicago School of sociology, gangs were treated as an organism in the urban ecosystem, caused by the social disorganization of their natural habitat. A comparable approach is taken by a number of more recent studies, which trace the emergence of gangs back to a troubled past which has disrupted the social environment. From this perspective, escalating levels of urban violence throughout Latin America—particularly in post-conflict and post-authoritarian countries—can be explained by a 'culture of violence', 'shadows of violence', the 'banality of violence', or the development of 'societies of fear'.[136] According to this explanatory angle, masculinity has an important role to play and gangs are partly the result of 'gendered socialization processes' in the midst of violence, to which young men are exposed.[137]

The second subtype, by contrast, is congruent with the rational choice approach and highlights the profit-oriented dimension of gangs. From this point of view, individuals decide rationally to join criminal gangs for their own economic benefits. A number of studies from the 1980s/1990s saw the causes of gang formation in economic conditions of the American 'underclass',[138] which are characterized by 'an intense competition for, and conflict over, the scarce resources that exist' in low-income neighbourhoods.[139] In a similar vein, Padilla argued that gang members 'view the gang as the most rational response to their social and economic circumstances'.[140] Confronted with bleak prospects for regular jobs in the formal economy, 'young men began turning to the gang in search of employment opportunities', mainly in the local drug trade.[141] In his ethnography of a public housing complex in Chicago, Venkatesh explicitly rejects pathologizing notions of a 'ghetto-specific [. . .] culture of poverty' and instead argues that gang members aspire for upward social mobility, even though through insecure and precarious 'underground economies'.[142] In addition to the two subtypes outlined above, one transformed type—criminal fiefdoms—can be identified.[143]

Rodgers and Muggah distinguish between two types of gangs in Central America:[144] First, the 'more localized, homegrown' *pandillas* are the most common type of gangs in Nicaragua. They resemble our subtype of youth gangs, which can also be found in Timor-Leste, South Africa, as well as Europe and North America.[145] The *maras*, by contrast, have 'transnational roots' and are the predominant type of gangs in the Northern Triangle.[146] *Maras* are closer to our criminal gangs and have been found to work as local 'subcontractors' for *Los Zetas* and other Mexican drug trafficking organizations which are expanding their operations southward into Central America.[147] Furthermore, certain gangs in Brazil, such as *Comando Vermelho*, have imposed a 'simulacrum of governmental control' onto the favelas, which serve as an ideal hiding place for drugs and provide a pool of unemployed young men for recruitment.[148] Having thus established their own criminal fiefdom, the 'Red Command' and the rival factions in which it has split up can hence be categorized as transformed types of gangs.

Gangs and National Security

Given the rise of powerful transformed types of gangs, a debate emerged around the question whether gangs should be analysed within the conceptual framework of non-state armed groups (NSAGs).[149] At the heart of this debate lies the question whether gangs do pose a direct threat to state sovereignty or not. A number of authors based at American military academies argue that gangs do ultimately aim to take control of the state through an 'evolutionary coup d' street [*sic*] process', in which they 'take control of turf one street or neighborhood at a time'.[150] From this point of view, 'political-agitator gangs' wage a new type of asymmetrical warfare coined 'urban insurgencies' or 'criminal insurgencies'.[151] Following this logic, Jamaican gangs are directly compared to the Lebanese Hezbollah, as 'the ultimate objective of both organizations is to compel radical political change to achieve some form of effective political control'.[152]

However, the claim that gangs intend to seize state power has been clearly rejected on the ground that most gangs would prefer to hide from or cooperate with state actors rather than to confront them.[153] In cases where gangs do 'turn to anti-state violence', they have been found to do so 'not, as in civil war, in hopes of conquering [...] territory or resources, but to influence state policy'.[154] At the same time, a small number of gangs that have obtained control over large-scale criminal fiefdoms, such as *Comando Vermelho* in Rio de Janeiro, 'can afford to engage in prolonged campaigns of aggression against [...] state forces'.[155] While this can lead to conditions of violence and disorder akin to civil wars, the state's sovereignty is arguably not directly challenged. Yet, by establishing a 'parallel state'[156] within their neighbourhood, gangs of this kind pose at least an indirect threat to the state because they undermine the authority of the government and prevent the enforcement of law and order.[157]

Such sophisticated criminal organizations, wielding considerable control over their criminal fiefdom and threatening state stability, constitute the transformed type of gangs. Because of their ability 'to carry out sustained and concerted military operations', this type of gangs 'could potentially be considered "armed groups" as understood in the context of IHL'[158]—albeit the legal basis for this reasoning is contested.[159] Legal considerations aside, it has been suggested that even though such gangs do not seek to overthrow the state, they can still be considered NSAGs because the harsh state response and the scapegoating they induce resembles the way insurgents are regularly dealt with.[160]

Conclusion

As the cases mentioned in this article have shown, transformed types of community-based armed groups (CBAGs) resemble each other more than subtypes resemble other subtypes. Even though most, if not all, CBAGs have a political, an economic, and a security dimension, one dimension is typically more pronounced—hence the differentiation in the ideal types of militias, gangs and vigilantes. The transformed types, by contrast, resemble one another to a higher degree because each dimension is strongly pronounced. The criminal fiefdom of the *Comando Vermelho* in Rio, the para-state of the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) in Colombia, and Taylor-land in Liberia all come close to constituting 'states-within-states' or 'quasi-states', with a more or less sophisticated security apparatus, tremendous revenues from illegal activities, and a considerable amount of de facto political power.[161] Yet, all these rather extreme examples started as quite ordinary CBAGs. *Comando Vermelho* was initially a prison gang, the AUC formed as a self-defence group, and Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia started as a political militia.

The tendency of CBAGs to turn bad is a central aspect of the concept that runs like a thread through all above-mentioned cases. For instance, many CBAGs start as crime-control vigilantes or self-defence forces and end up running protection rackets or working as subcontractors for organized crime groups or political entrepreneurs. This is what happened with *pandillas* and *maras* in Central America, with rural defence forces in Mexico, and with vigilantes in Kenya and Nigeria. Other CBAGs

begin as political grassroots movements but end up as criminal gangs or as hired thugs of political parties, as with *Mungiki* in Kenya or some of the *colectivos* in Venezuela. Thus, in virtually every discussed case, in the end, the very civilians comprising the community to which CBAGs pledge allegiance are the ones who suffer most.

725 Additionally, in some cases, the security and integrity of the state are threatened. This is most notably the case when vigilantes, militias or gangs turn into transformed types of CBAGs. As a result of their tendency to turn bad and because of the threat to stability they pose when they have transformed, CBAGs are a serious problem for the countries in which they form and for international actors operating in these countries.

730 Therefore, having a clear conceptual understanding of such groups is of utmost importance for international actors working in conflict zones, especially in countries with ongoing peacekeeping operations. Once an armed group has been classified as vigilante, militia or gang, policy choices must be informed by this analytical knowledge, as simply applying standard tools used to deal with other non-state armed

735 groups (NSAGs), such as rebels or terrorist groups, might worsen instead of solving the problem.

There are two typical strategies vis-à-vis NSAGs that have also been applied to CBAGs: (1) coercion based on the use of force, as in military pacification operations or *mano dura* (firm hand) anti-gang policies in Latin America; (2) cooperation on the

740 basis of dialogue and consensus, for instance, in the form of gang truces in Central America or power-sharing arrangements with ethnic militias in Africa. However, each approach has serious limitations. The problem with the coercive approach is that the use of force may actually increase the proliferation of NSAGs if the state outsources law enforcement to vigilantes, or if political actors establish their own mili-

745 tias to counter those of their opponents. At the same time, if communities are indiscriminately targeted in operations against CBAGs, they might in fact be driven to support CBAGs against the oppressive state. Likewise, engaging CBAGs in dialogue grants them legitimacy and strengthens them, thereby accelerating their transformation into transformed types and further weakening the position of the state.

750 Therefore, an alternative approach towards CBAGs is needed that is based on the substitution of the functions CBAGs fulfil for their members, sponsors, or community. In contrast to the coercive and cooperative strategies, the substitutive approach aims to enhance the legitimacy of the state by effectively rendering CBAGs obsolete. This can be achieved only by improving the performance of the state with regard to

755 the three dimensions of CBAGs—security, politics, and economics. Concerning security, the state must regain its monopoly over the legitimate use of force and employ it in accordance with the rule of law, lest the communities in which CBAGs are based are further alienated from the state. International efforts in this regard should focus on security sector reform, whereby particular attention should

760 be paid to community policing schemes. On the political front, the use of militias by political actors must be thwarted through the promotion of the core principles of democracy, including good governance and respect for the rule of law. As far as the economic dimension is concerned, development activities should focus on the generation of job opportunities for at-risk youth in order to improve their life

765 chances and to limit the attractiveness of joining gangs. Community-based armed

violence reduction and prevention programmes can be particularly helpful in this respect.

However, institution building is a long-term endeavour and notoriously difficult to implement for external actors. Moreover, it might face strong resistance from spoilers with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Still, it presents the sole sustainable solution to the problem of CBAGs. Only a viable and modern state which provides for the basic needs of its citizens and is based on the principles of democracy—including accountability and a functioning rule of law—can address the security-related, political, and economic problems that led to the proliferation of CBAGs in the first place. Thus, international actors should focus their energy on improving the performance of institutions when assisting states that are facing the challenge of CBAGs.

Disclosure Statement

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