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Academic Foresights

Non-State Armed Groups

How do you analyze the present situation of non-state armed groups?

According to the Study Group on Causes of War at the University of Hamburg (AKUF), in 2010 there were 32 wars and major armed conflicts on the globe. In all of them non-state war actors have played major roles, be it as instigators of violent conflict or as emerging organizations in ongoing conflicts. This observation is in line with the overall trend that we observe since the end of World War II: While wars between states become rare events, there is a strong tendency towards intra-state warfare. In current political science, violence in civil wars and so-called "non-state armed actors" have therefore attracted a lot of attention (cf. Kalyvas 2006, Weinstein 2007).

Armed groups is perhaps a better term than "non-state actors" for these groups as only on first sight they are "non"-state actors. A closer look at the genesis, the dynamic and the transformation of such actors shows that there all kinds of linkages and transmutations between violence organized by states and those organizations and practices that seem to be a challenge of statehood. First, many armed groups have been formed by states. Paramilitaries and militias are often deliberate creations of governments in order to bolster their armed forces. This phenomenon is known from Serbia, Colombia, Sudan and many other countries. Second, the "art" of warfare, of organizing large-scale violence, is almost exclusively taught in state institutions. Most violence experts in armed groups have learned these skills while in the military. Thirdly, many armed groups turn into state actors later on. The "success" of their violent politics means almost always to take over power, to become the new government and to turn from guerillas into statesmen. This has a long history, and in a way, the current governments of Libya, of the DR Congo or Uganda do not differ in this regard from earlier historical examples such as Algeria or even the United States.

Despite the fact that current "non-state" war actors are pictured in media as greedy, cruel and reckless maniacs, all of the larger groups that have been actors in the wars of the last ten years or so are highly organized, often disciplined and highly diversified organizations. Hamas, Hezbollah and Fatah are primary examples, and one might draw a line from these organizational features to the ability of non-state war

actors to become parts of functioning states if they gain power.

These relative "success"-stories should not deceive us about the precarious circumstances, often in times of political repression, in which armed resistance usually emerges. Unknown though is the number of armed groups that fail in early stages. Their main problem on their way to political power is the "shadow of violence" that is cast upon them by their own activity: the exertion of violence. The pain and horror that in inflicted on human beings by threatening to hurt their physical integrity or by actualing exerting this violence has severe delegitimizing effects. It is this "shadow" that accompanies violent politics, be it by state or non-state actors. Armed actors therefore need strong narratives and a whole range of legitimizing politics in order to maintain their cohesiveness as a collective actor and in order to gain public support. Their legitimacy is constantly in danger, due to the effects of the violence they exert. In case of derailing violence, this then becomes a problem for the legitimacy of armed groups themselves (cf. Schlichte 2009a).

In your opinion, how will the situation likely evolve over the next five years?

As with most contemporary structured events and developments, there is little reason to believe in fundamental change in just five years. In many contexts, predominantly outside Europe, East Asia and North America, political violence will play an important role in the foreseeable future. The main reason is that social and economic dynamics continue which we awkwardly label "social change". Urbanisation, the land grabbing and land flight, a large informal sector - in short, all kinds of precarious circumstances of life will prevail in large parts of the world. There are hitherto no sufficient institutions in which such huge social contradictions could be processed. This will lead to violent outbursts in many instances in the coming years too.

It is very likely, that the patterns of how armed actors emerge in such political conflicts will continue in the foreseeable future: either state repression leads to the radicalization of political opposition, or fractions of political classes will take up arms in order to fight their way back to power, or states will delegate violence to paramilitary forces that then turn against their former masters (cf. Schlichte 2009b).

At the same time, the changes that we have observed in internal warfare over the last ten or fifteen years will continue too: Less and less it will be possible to see governments overtaken by growing internal armed groups without major external support. The conserving tendency of a state-structured world will render the success of such revolutionary wars less and less likely. As recent examples have shown, exceptions are possible if great powers' interpretation fits with rebel aims. But without great power support, any clear military success of armed rebellion is unlikely.

More likely are outcomes produced by mediation and internationally embedded forms

of negotiation. The reason for this is that great powers, first and foremost western states, are put under more and more moral pressure by a public that sees in any armed conflict a scandal. The resulting pressure on Western governments to contribute to an end of violence is much higher than it was during the Cold War when instrumental politics, so-called "realpolitik" stood against moral considerations. Furthermore, state leaders are eager to harvest the merits of having brought peace to other countries or regions.

It would be a misunderstanding, however, to see this growing internationalization of rule as being solely caused by external actors. It is equally solicited and welcomed by local actors who like to draw on resources that are inserted in their political spaces. This is particularly pertinent in politics in Subsaharan Africa, often described as the continent of "extraversion" (cf. Bayart 2000). All kinds of political actors are keen to attract external support as this enlarges their power base. The politics of armed groups, in this regard, are one prominent vector of the internationalization of politics that result in current times from major political crises in allegedly "failed states" in which other states feel entitled to intervene.

What are the structural long-term perspectives?

This growing international involvement has consequences for the political results that we see growing out of interventions of all sorts. African cases are the future here for other world regions: Whenever a major political crisis, involving internationally perceived violence takes place, there is a race of all kinds of agencies, governmental and non, to intervene and to contribute to an end of suffering. This morally induced engagement has, however, un-anticipated consequences. In countries like Uganda, Sierra Leone or Mozambique where civil wars ended in the 1980s, 1990s or just a few years ago, the post-war political constellation is a jig-saw puzzle of authority. While formally a nation-state is re-established and a government – be it democratically elected or not – is visible and prima vista functioning, authority is I fact fragmented and highly internationalized. Large parts of state budgets are grants and loans from international donors, and a lot of those functions that are usually attributed to the state are now done by all kinds of agencies, education and health being the prime examples. The politics of armed groups are therefore not just a military affair but mirrors general tendencies of international politics: an ever enlarged space of interventionism that is partly driven by interest in order or material gain, and partly driven by a moral agenda that emanates from the promises of modernity generally.

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