Research Article

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Armed non-state actors as a distinct research topic

Abstract: This article introduces the topic of armed non-state actors and briefly summarizes the contributions to this special issue.

The usual need of justifying the choice of a particular topic for an article, a monograph, an edited volume or indeed a special issue of a learned journal seems not to be very strong in our case. Indeed, armed non-state groups have been at the forefront of media and scholarly attention since the beginning of this century. One could argue that indeed they have been, together with the Global Economic Crisis of 2008, the most pressing subjects on the public agenda. Names of groups or leaders of armed groups such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram, the Lord's Resistance Army, Hizbullah and many others are by now in no need of explanation for the large public and hundreds of scholars have produced a significant number of solid works focused on them. Commercial bookstores and university libraries, electronic or physical, have filled their shelves with books and articles on asymmetric conflicts and non-state armed groups.

And yet, when putting together the concept for this issue, the editors of this special issue of the *International Review of Social Research* came to the conclusion that more research is needed, not only because the subjects of investigation are numerous, interesting and pressing, but perhaps because the theoretical efforts of understanding of non-state armed groups are still not what they should be. Two main hindrances to a thorough examination of non-state armed groups can be immediately identified. The first is in the very name of the subject: the "non-state"

presupposes the relation with the state as a necessity for the understanding of these particular social groups. The second was in the widespread belief that these actors have something intrinsically new about themselves, that they are a response to particular conditions arising at the earliest from the processes of decolonization or, at the latest, from the disturbances in world order begun with the end of the Cold War.

The editors of this issue believe that both of these problems should be overcome for a systematic and theoretically rich understanding of these actors to be pursued. First, these armed groups should become themselves the focus of theoretical investigations. While their relation to central governments is important, sometimes decisive for their nature, they do not necessarily exist because of or in opposition to the central government. To miss this fundamental aspect, to consider them simple reactions to state policies, strategies or existence is indeed to fetishize the state, to raise it to a *sine qua non* of social and political life, which of course is a position hard to accept, both from the perspective of history and contemporary social sciences. There are numerous other reasons beside state actions explaining the creation, existence and actions of these armed groups. Local problems, ethnic disputes, religious conflicts, economic strife, ecological crises can be as good and as real explanations in understanding these social actors as state repression or state infringement of minority rights can be.

Secondly, the focus on new armed groups and new conditions for their existence and actions has obscured to a certain extent that throughout history non-state armed actors were a constant feature of life. From marauding bands in the times of the ancient empires through the mercenary bands of the high medieval and Renaissance worlds to the pirates and buccaneers roaming the high seas in not so distant centuries, men and women have taken up arms against, outside and beyond the boundaries of state and state power. Following their own interests, desires or predicaments, armed groups operating independently of or against centralized states have been a constant of history.

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These two arguments that came quite naturally when reflecting upon the current state of the study of armed non-state actors were the basis of the call for papers the editors issued. It is a truism to state that state-centric perspectives are no longer satisfactory in approaching many world politics' issues. Thus, we intended to address the very definition of statehood – its claim over the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence – so that we were mostly interested in challenging the assumption of the centrality of the state in the analysis and understanding of armed groups and we hoped that the contributing authors would share this assumption.

We were not mistaken. The articles selected for this issue came from a variety of angles and even though they covered in their case studies just (if just is the right word here) cases from Asia, they are nevertheless relevant for the issues concerning non-state actor research the world over. We were particularly pleased that some of our articles were based on extensive fieldwork including interviews and personal observations in places as different as Lebanon, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The authors published in this issue of the *International Review of Social Research* used a multitude of methods and approaches, including anthropology, media analysis, risk analysis, war studies and political philosophy, which all highlight the multidisciplinary perspectives of investigating this research field. The armed groups that they chose to focus on encompassed a vast variety of formations. They included militant groups transformed into political parties while retaining their military structure and abilities; former terrorist cells transforming into a religious revolutionary movement seeking to create its own state and to spur a worldwide Islamist uprising; a former political regime now forced to return to its roots as a guerrilla movement and a collection of tribal, clan-based armed groups. This constellation of approaches and types of social actors meant also a challenge for the selection of the right peer-reviewers, who themselves had not only to have knowledge, sometimes first-hand of the actual terrain, but also to be steeped in international theory, philosophy, anthropology, sociology or strategic studies.

In dealing with ISIS, the non-state (if still) armed group that made most of the world's headlines in 2014-2015, Peter Layton employs an amended version of Mary Kaldor's theory on new wars to understand the group and also provides an interesting and important discussion of the group's media strategy. Kaldor's thesis was intended to explain interethnic conflicts in states unable to cope with the challenges of globalization, such as Yugoslavia. By amending Kaldor's perspective, Peter Layton considers ISIS's media sophisticated strategy in terms of its search for legitimacy in the eyes of a transnational imagined community. Unlike Kaldor's research subject, the audience of ISIS's message is very diverse, so that it requires specific ways of addressing it. Layton's main conclusions refresh those reached by Kaldor almost twenty years ago. Firstly, that grasping the consequences of globalization is of paramount importance in analysing ISIS. Secondly, that a transnational phenomenon requires a transnational approach, both for understanding and answering it.

Jeremy Simpson's work on risk management responses in Afghanistan deals extensively with the impact of Western policy choices concerning risk on the deterioration of the security situation in the country and the impetus they gave to the activity of non-state armed groups. Using as the main theoretical reference that provided by Ulrich Beck's approach of the 'risk society', Jeremy Simpson criticizes it on the grounds of being underdeveloped in the terms of the risk distribution. In his research he distinguishes among risk-management in civil-developmental, counter-insurgent and counter-terrorist dimensions of the international intervention in Afghanistan. The convergence of practices in these three areas produces some tensions, as, for instance, those concerning "operational risks to intervening actors, reputational risks vis-à-vis domestic polities, and reputational risks vis-à-vis local actors and populations". Thus, Simpson argues in favour of a more sophisticated approach of the risk than that provided by Beck, one that would take into consideration, for instance, the social location of the actors involved, but also the consequences, on various actors, of the strategies they are subject to.

Mariam Farida employs in innovative manner casuistry to understand the message and impact of Hizbullah inside the Lebanese state, having to juggle with the many dimensions of this formation - as a political party, an armed group and a provider of social services for a segment of Lebanese society. The key element for Hizbullah's success in its many roles is, in Mariam Farida's interpretation, its pragmatism. This pragmatism is, in the interpretation given by Farida, best understood through Hizbullah's ability to use the *fatwas*. Thus, the casuistry is offering both the tool for legitimizing the religious identity of the group and to offer itself the necessary leverage in dealing with various secular circumstances.

Matthew Wilkinson tracks the Chittagong Hill Tracts groups' actions, motives and reasons for existence in an approach that blends history, conflict studies and personal anthropological observations in this area of Eastern Bangladesh. Focused on a centre-periphery conflict in a post-colonial state, the paper is structured in three sections. Firstly, the author describes, from

ethnic and political perspectives "The Modern/ Primitive Divide" which is the context of the conflict. Its violent stage started in 1976, opposing various communities to the central government. Secondly, Wilkinson focuses on the Accord intended to put an end to the conflict (1997), considered an exclusive process, the state of Bangladesh disregarding the differences among the various "primitive" communities, many smaller groups being cast aside. The unstable present situation, with the emergence of new violent actors, is thus considered, in the third part of the article, as the direct consequence of the hegemonic perspective on which the Accord is based.

The editors of this special issue of the IRSR hope that the articles gathered here serve the academic community in a variety of ways: by helping de-centre the state in the analysis of armed groups; by offering exciting and interesting insights in the specific conditions of the case studies; and by showing that multi-disciplinary approaches can lead to coherent and analytically sound understandings of such complex objects of investigation. We thus believe that the readers of this special issue of the *International Review of Social Research* will find both refreshing and intellectually challenging the perspectives on non-state armed groups offered in these articles.

Bionotes

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