
32 Armed Groups: Changing the Rules

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The increasing presence of transnational and nonstate actors in today's conflicts is not a surprise but rather the logical result of changes in the political, economic, social, and technical landscapes.¹ Thus the type of conflict we are experiencing today, with its ubiquitous presence of a bewildering variety of armed groups, is not an aberration. Rather it is part of the coevolution of war and society that has been a consistent element in the history of man. And, as always, war continues to evolve.

The formation of armed groups has been encouraged by two factors. First, the steadily increasing pressure on the nation-state has significantly reduced its ability to provide security for its population. Second, changes in civilian technology and the widespread availability of military weapons have greatly increased the power of such groups.

While nation-states are still the most influential players in the international arena and will remain so for the foreseeable future, they increasingly share power with a wide variety of players. From international trade agreements to subnational armed groups to transnational business and criminal cartels, states are under pressure from both above and below.

Externally, international and even transnational organizations have forced states to yield power in the political and economic fields. In areas as diverse as tariffs, interest rates, and even the use of land mines, states have yielded sovereignty to outside players. In fact today, many elements of society look beyond the state to international or transnational organizations to solve problems or set favorable conditions for their enterprises.

The changes in the political and economic fields are reinforced by those in the social field. Many people are shifting their allegiances from nations to causes. An Earth First activist in the Pacific Northwest will likely have more contact, such as e-mail, chat, and telephone, with a similar activist in Berlin than with the logger who lives next door. As little

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as 60 years ago, only the very wealthy had the time or resources to establish regular communications with people from other nations. Now, almost everyone in the West can do so. These international connections impact how nation-states operate.

Of particular concern, the same changes that have made legitimate international entities more effective—information technology, vastly improved transportation infrastructure, the increasingly global character of business and finance—all support and encourage the evolution of transnational groups as diverse as Al Qaeda, Earth Liberation Front, drug cartels, and international religious movements. These technologies, and the institutions and the groups they reinforce, challenge the state externally.

In addition to these civilian technology and development trends, armed groups are heavily reinforced by the proliferation of first-class military firearms. Automatic rifles, machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), antitank missiles, an unlimited variety of improvised explosive devices, and even guided missiles provide armed groups with firepower that used to be reserved for the militaries of nation-states. With these weapons, armed groups vastly overmatch police departments and often even military units.

Internally, the state is being stressed by its inability to provide effective security for parts of its population. In contrast to the ever-increasing international and transnational aspects of economic and social activity, security is becoming much more local. As many nation-states fail to fulfill their basic social contracts, people turn to local solutions—often militias. In essence, the people are forced to turn to an earlier form of social organization—family, clan, tribe, region, and their associated militias—for protection. While particularly true in those states that were arbitrarily formed and encompass widely varying and even hostile groups, this is not just a third-world phenomenon. We have militias in the United States; we simply call them gated communities. In these communities, the home owners have decided that government can no longer provide sufficient security and therefore have hired private militias to do the job.

Many subnational groups form militias for exactly the same reasons our suburban gated communities do: they feel their governments are not responsive to their needs.

A second reason for the formation of armed subnational groups is the increasing awareness that across the globe other such groups have achieved recognition, rights, privileges, and even self-rule. Given the legacy of colonial boundaries, many nations are dominated by majorities that have historically abused their minority populations. With the advent of inexpensive, global communications, local minorities can not only see that other similar groups have fought for better treatment but can even communicate with those groups to learn how to conduct such a campaign.

Obviously, the next question must be “Is there anything new here that threatens the United States?” If there is no threat, then we can continue to pursue the high-technology, conventional force that has given us great victories in the past. However, if these armed groups prove a genuine threat to U.S. interests, we have to study them more closely and develop the complex, interagency processes necessary to deal with them.

The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan answer that question. The new methods of war allow even fractious, uncooperative armed groups to pose serious strategic challenges for the United States. Yet such a snapshot of current events does not tell us if this new form of war is simply an aberration or is here to stay. In short, do we have to

learn to deal with this type of war or will we find that dearly sought “near-peer competitor” and get back to doing what we do best?

Unfortunately, Iraq and Afghanistan are not aberrations. Rather they are the product of a continuing evolution in warfare that has been visible for over 60 years. The advent of nuclear weapons ensured that modern conventional wars have been limited in scope and result. As nuclear arsenals grew, the cost of war between major powers outweighed any rational gain that could be achieved by all-out fighting. In turn, the major powers often limited what client states could do. Thus, conventional wars since 1945 have ended with a return to the status quo. The Korean War; the Arab-Israeli wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973; the Falklands War; and Desert Storm all ended with no significant changes to the strategic environments of the participants.

In contrast, unconventional wars such as China’s revolution, the Indochina wars, Afghan-Soviet War, Chechen-Soviet War, and the First Intifada all resulted in significant political change within the nation where the conflict was fought. Even wars where the counterinsurgent won—Malaya, Philippines, Oman, El Salvador—resulted in significant political change as part of the resolution of the conflict.

Of even more significance for our discussion is the fact that while most insurgencies fail, insurgency remains the only type of war that has defeated a superpower. Further, it has done so five times in recent years. The Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan and Chechnya. The United States was driven out of Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia. And insurgency is clearly challenging the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan today. Thus while insurgencies don’t have a high probability of victory, they are the only form of war that has a chance against a superpower.

As early as February 2002, Al Qaeda strategist Ubeid al-Qurashi wrote he was confident that Al Qaeda would beat the United States by using fourth-generation war. In an article he posted online, al-Qurashi wrote,

Fourth-generation warfare, the experts said, is a new type of war in which fighting will be mostly scattered. The battle will not be limited to destroying military targets and regular forces, but will include societies, and will [seek to] destroy popular support for the fighters within the enemy’s society. In these wars, the experts stated in their article, “television news may become a more powerful operational weapon than armored divisions.” They also noted that [in fourth-generation wars] “the distinction between war and peace will be blurred to the vanishing point. . . .”

Other Western strategists disagreed with these analyses, claiming that the new warfare would be strategically based on psychological influence and on the minds of the enemy’s planners—not only on military means as in the past, but also on the use of all the media and information networks . . . in order to influence public opinion and, through it, the ruling elite. They claimed that the fourth-generation wars would, tactically, be small-scale, emerging in various regions across the planet against an enemy that, like a ghost, appears and disappears. The focus would be political, social, economic, and military. [It will be] international, national, tribal, and even organizations would participate (even though tactics and technology from previous generations would be used).

This new type of war presents significant difficulties for the Western war machine, and it can be expected that [Western] armies will change fundamentally. This forecast did not

arise in a vacuum—if only the cowards [among the Muslim clerics] knew that fourth-generation wars have already occurred and that the superiority of the theoretically weaker party has already been proven; in many instances, nation-states have been defeated by stateless nations.²

Since al-Qurashi wrote in 2002, other insurgent groups have consistently echoed his theme that fourth-generation war will allow armed groups to defeat even superpowers. For instance, on 10 July 2006, the Global Jihadist Media Front released an article that reviewed the success insurgent groups have had against regular armies.

About the number [of soldiers] deployed: the Red Army had more than 100,000 soldiers in Afghanistan by the end of 1979 and there was no significant resistance in the beginning. Even when the number of the Mujahideen reached its peak after 1985, [numerical] superiority was still in favor of the Soviet Army and its agents at a ratio of 5:2. In Somalia, it was easier, because the Americans invaded the area with 40,000 soldiers and left the area without difficulty after a small resistance by a number of fighters, which did not exceed 2000. This means that the balance of forces was in favor of America and its Allies with a ratio of 20:1. In the first Chechen War (1994–1996), the Chechen victory came after Russia invaded Chechen lands with 100,000 soldiers. The Chechen resistance did not exceed, in best cases, 13,000 fighters. This means that the balance of forces was in Russia's favor at a ratio of 7.7:1. The Russian Army invaded Grozny, with an army of 50,000. The Mujahideen had fighting groups which did not exceed 3,000 Mujahideen, but succeeded in 1995 in not only breaking the encirclement [of Grozny] but also a counterattack on the flank of the encircling [Russian] army. This compelled the Russians to retreat with heavy losses.³

Another factor making insurgencies increasingly difficult for Western powers to defeat is the fact that they have evolved from the monolithic, hierarchical communist insurgencies of Mao and Ho Chi Minh to the loose “coalitions of the willing” we see in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. Like society as a whole, insurgencies have become networked, transnational, and even transdimensional. Today's insurgents are perfectly comfortable inhabiting both the real and cyber worlds. Elements of their organizations are in one, the other, and even both environments.

Among the first organizations to become truly transdimensional was Al Qaeda. When driven out of its training camps in Afghanistan, it sought the ability to recruit, proselytize, train, reeducate, and even make logistics arrangements on the Web. The last five years have seen an explosion of Web sites supporting armed groups. They make it possible to seek like-minded individuals literally anywhere in the world. Using chat rooms, recruiters can make contact with potential recruits. After initial screening, they will be invited to password-protected rooms where the chat is more inflammatory. This allows the recruiters to provide slanted views of their causes. When they feel a person has been sufficiently educated for the next step, they will put the individual in touch with a local radical group. That group will make person-to-person contact and continue the recruiting, motivating, and training process. If possible, the group can move the recruit to real-world training camps in Iraq or Pakistan. If not, it can train and educate him or her in fully functioning cyber training facilities—complete with mentors, manuals, and

sermons. And by the way, Islamic fundamentalists are not the only groups using the Web, so there is competition to attract the disaffected and malleable.

The societal changes that favor agile, transnational businesses also favor the transdimensional armed group. Compounding the problems nation-states face dealing with these armed groups is the fact that one thing has remained constant with insurgencies. They are long fights that have ranged from one to four decades in modern times. Nation-states often lack the patience to endure these very long fights.

It is clear armed groups are a challenge. Worse, there is a truly alarming variety of armed groups active in the world today, which dramatically increases the difficulty of understanding their motivations, methods, and goals. To continue the discussion we need some method of categorizing them. For the purposes of this chapter, I will draw on the categories of motivation used by the United Nations in its *Manual for Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups*. The motivation of a group is a strong indicator of how that group will fight and what, if any, limits it will impose on its use of force.

In terms of founding motivations, armed groups generally fall into three categories: they can be *reactionary* (reacting to some situation, or something that members of the groups experienced or with which they identify); they can be *opportunistic*, meaning that they seized on a political or economic opportunity to enhance their own power or positions; or they are founded to further *ideological* objectives.⁴

These three categories are useful because they allow insights into how the groups organize, grow, and operate.

Reactionary groups often form in response to threats to their communities. They focus on the traditional military task of protecting the population. As a result, they tend to be subnational or national groups that operate in specific geographic areas and attempt to protect the people of those areas. In essence, these armed groups represent a return to earlier security arrangements, because a state has failed in its basic social contract of providing security for its population. These are the ethnic-sectarian militias we have seen develop around the world in response to insecurity. Groups like the Tamil Tigers and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq's (SCIRI's) Badr Militia are typical of reactionary groups.

These groups need to protect populations but lack the military power to do so. As a result, they usually resort to irregular warfare—but use conventional arms. While highly effective, these weapons are also those most familiar to Western security services and thus easier to anticipate and defeat. This does not mean they do not challenge Western armed forces. The worldwide use of suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and vehicle borne IEDs have allowed these groups to inflict heavy casualties on national armed forces they confront. However, the reactionary groups tend not to be a threat externally since they are focused on defending their own peoples. They tend to restrict their efforts to the immediate vicinity, but this may include cross-border operations since their peoples' traditional lands are often split by international borders.

Opportunistic groups are those that evolve to take advantage of a vacuum to seize power or wealth. Essentially, these are criminal groups and have been around for centuries. What is different now is the fact that commercially available weapons and other technology allow these groups to overmatch all but the most-well-armed police. They are

increasingly even a match for the armed forces of a nation. These groups include organizations like Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13).⁵ One interesting aspect of MS-13 is the fact that it controls noncontiguous terrain in several nations—a village in Latin America, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, and perhaps just a building in an East Coast suburb. Yet these gangs make use of the communications and transportation networks to loosely coordinate their activities.

A third great motivator, ideology, often gives birth to armed groups. These are groups like Al Qaeda, Aryan Brotherhood, Aum Shinrikyo, Earth Liberation Front, and Animal Liberation Front. While the last three do not claim to be “armed,” they do use violence in an attempt to achieve their goals. Ideological groups are more dangerous to the United States than simple military armed groups because of their selections of weapons and their “no limits” approach to conflict. In the past, these groups have used society’s assets against it. From Timothy McVeigh’s use of fertilizer and diesel fuel to Al Qaeda’s use of airliners, these groups tend to be highly creative in their attacks. They are more likely to use society’s infrastructure of chemical plants, mass shipments of fertilizer, hazardous chemicals, and even bio technology as weapons of mass destruction than groups motivated by self-defense or opportunism.

Of even more concern is the fact that ideological groups are essentially impossible to deter. Not only are they working for a higher being/purpose that provides moral justification, and sometimes a moral requirement to use any available weapon; they have no return address. Thus they do not have to fear massive retaliation. If Al Qaeda detonates a nuclear device on U.S. soil, where exactly do we fire our nukes in return?

These groups will not even be self-deterred by the inherent danger in the use of biological weapons. While other groups may hesitate to release a contagious biological agent for fear of killing their own people or members, ideological groups often believe that the higher power guiding their actions will either protect their members or call them home for their earned reward. Thus the combination of extraordinarily rapid advances in biotechnology and the spread of ideologically driven armed groups presents a major threat to the global population.

Mixed groups are a more recent development. These are groups that have a mix of reactionary, ideological, and opportunistic motivations. Sometimes they are reactionary or ideological groups that turn to crime to provide the resources they need to operate. Al Qaeda is both an ideological and an opportunistic group as it has increasingly turned to crime to fund its operations. The IRA has increasingly turned to crime—and may actually have moved from reactionary to purely opportunistic motivation.

Others are ideological groups that find themselves as the *de facto* rulers of areas and therefore must also provide their communities the protection common to reactionary groups. These militias include organizations like the Jaysh Al Mahdi militia in Iraq, Hizbollah in Lebanon, and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Nigerian Delta in Nigeria.

Some can even fall into all three categories. For instance, Hamas and Al Mahdi provide protection, espouse an ideology, and participate in crime for funding. In fact, most armed groups now use crime to fund operations.

Because these groups are loose coalitions, they frequently splinter. Sometimes the fracture is over strategic goals, sometimes over simple personality fights, other times over how to divide the spoils—either territory or wealth. This tendency to fragment further increases the difficulty facing intelligence officers trying to track and understand the groups. Yet as we have seen in Iraq's Anbar province, the shifts in loyalty or hatred on a local level can have a major impact on the status of the insurgency. In August of 2006, Colonel Peter Devlin, G-2, I Marine Expeditionary Force, released a very pessimistic analysis of the situation in Anbar. Yet, even as he completed his report, the Sunni tribes in Anbar were deciding to turn against Al Qaeda in Iraq and drive it out of the province. Within six months, there had been exceptional improvements across the province. As Colonel Devlin pointed out, these changes were beyond the power of the U.S. military and could only be achieved by changes in the political situation in the province. In Anbar, as in most tribal societies, such shifts take place not among individuals, but entire families, clans, or tribes shift sides.

A major problem with armed groups is that they are self-reinforcing. They develop because a government cannot control its territory. Their growth then contributes to the instability in the region and results in the government ceding more territory. In some cases, a single group takes over that territory. In others, many groups fight over the same territory. We saw this after the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan and the Israelis from Gaza. It is happening in Iraq as coalition forces are unable to control parts of the country. The basic failure of the state to provide security combined with the easy availability of arms creates a downward spiral that results in ever-increasing instability.

When multiple groups fight over the territory, it is inevitably a disaster for the people of the region—and for their neighbors, who have to deal with the spillover of refugees and the violence that follows in their wake. However, a single group seizing a territory may actually be a greater threat to the West. As we saw with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, such a group can focus its resources on attacking the West rather than on defending itself against local opponents.

Obviously, these motivations have been with us a long time. Why are armed groups only now becoming so prominent? As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the political, economic, social, and technical trends of the early twenty-first century not only encourage the growth of armed groups but vastly increase their power and impact in the international arena. This increase in power and impact obviously makes armed groups an attractive alternative to the failing nation-state. Success breeds imitators.

This fact has been recognized in many capitals. Nation-states are beginning to devise ways to come to grips with these armed groups. Unfortunately, to date this has been a slow and painful process, as evidenced by Israel in Lebanon and the United States in Iraq. Nation-states are forced to operate within their complex international organizations burdened by extensive bureaucracies. In contrast, the armed groups are free to make full use of the power of networks provided by modern society. As a result, we can expect to be reacting rather than anticipating for the foreseeable future.

Before closing, there is one final type of armed group I'd like to discuss—private military companies (PMCs). Admittedly, these groups fall under the category of

opportunistic but I think they deserve special consideration due to their great potential for changing the way we conduct international relations.

In the last 15 years, PMCs have dramatically increased their presence on the international stage. While they formerly existed on the fringes of international relations, the U.S. heavy use of armed contractors in Iraq has moved them to center stage. The length of this chapter prevents a full exploration of the numerous implications of the increased use of PMCs but instead I will simply offer some thoughts to start a discussion.

For instance, how does one hold a company accountable for its actions? How will these companies change the face of armed conflict? What impact will these companies have on the relationship between resource-rich rulers and their populations? How will they be employed by nations to provide basing and forward deployment of major power assets?

PMC spokesmen have reassured us that responsible companies are working with governments to devise effective regulations to control their operations. This is in fact true. However, while the United States has moved to increase the accountability of such companies through regulations and contracts, these methods have yet to be seriously tested. Further, much as the shipping industry avoided regulation by registering under flags of convenience, we can expect PMCs to do the same. If regulations interfere with how they wish to operate, they will move their corporations to other countries or even dissolve and start again as different legal entities in different countries.⁶

The sudden presence of these companies in numerous conflicts presents some interesting challenges for the international community. In the more-than-350 years since the Treaty of Westphalia, we have developed diplomatic, economic, and military techniques for dealing with crises created when nation-states use armed forces—or even threaten to use them. We do not have such mechanisms in place when nation-states or even private individuals employ armed contractors. If China had announced it planned to send significant numbers of soldiers to Sudan to assist with security and construction, there would at least have been dialogue in the United Nations. Yet open-source reports have placed the number of Chinese security forces working for Chinese companies at over 20,000 men—or two divisions worth. More recently, open-source reporting indicates the Chinese will send significantly larger numbers of both construction and security personnel to Angola. Chinese companies will in effect have multiple divisions forward deployed in Africa. It is admittedly nearly impossible to confirm these contracts, yet these events simply did not show up in international discussion. This is particularly interesting given the fact China has just signed a 10-year contract with Angola to provide oil at \$60 a barrel. While the contractors are not an official branch of the Chinese government, their presence clearly puts China in position to “resolve” any disputes with the Angolan government over that contract. Thus, by the creative use of private companies, negotiations between nation-states have moved outside the international system. The rulers of these countries find the Chinese particularly appealing because they do not pressure their hosts about human rights or governmental reform.

Of course, “governments” of resource-rich areas can employ PMCs to seize and hold the rich areas of a country while simply ignoring the rest. We have already seen this with local militias and the “blood diamonds” but have not seen it applied in a systematic

way. We may be seeing the first signs of this in Africa. Sudan has hired Chinese firms to provide security for its oil facilities. These firms not only provide reliable security, weapons, and training for Sudanese; they have no comments on how Sudan chooses to conduct its internal affairs. Similarly, Chad may have entered talks with private companies to circumvent the requirement that a percentage of the oil revenues be held in trust for the general population.

Using private military companies, a very small minority can control a country. While small minorities have often seized control of governments, it requires effective security forces to keep such governments in power. In many parts of the world, such forces simply are not reliable so a prudent government must pay some attention to the majority. If they hire an effective PMC, rulers will no longer need to negotiate with the majority to maintain power. Instead, they can rely on contracted security. Worst case, they will focus the PMC on protecting the wealth-generating parts of the country. They have no reason to bother with the poorer regions and may simply abandon those areas to poverty and lawlessness. The net result is more under- or ungoverned spaces in unstable parts of the world.

Another intriguing use for PMCs is to establish forward operating bases and forward-deployed forces. In the same way the British used the East India Company to establish bases and regiments in India, China can use commercial entities throughout the world. Chinese PMCs already have a major ground presence in Africa, Chinese commercial entities are building ports along the shipping lanes from the Middle East to China, and China has the potential to offer naval PMCs to provide security against pirates along major shipping routes. As an example, in March of 2006, Somalia negotiated with a Chinese naval firm to train and equip a Somali coast guard.⁷ Such naval PMCs will obviously need maintenance and support facilities, which the companies will build. In effect, the PMCs can establish a chain of naval facilities near the choke points of the sea routes.

To date, Western media and legislatures have focused on the operations of Western private military companies. Yet the true potential for providing very large, well-trained, and well-armed private militaries lies with China. India and other high-population, low-employment countries can be expected to follow in China's footsteps. Clearly this is a subject that needs further study.

SUMMARY

For purposes of brevity, this chapter barely touches the surface of the very complex subject of armed groups. The key point is the fact that political, economic, social, and technical trends are increasing the number, variety, and power of these armed groups. We must acknowledge they are already major players in ongoing conflicts, have defeated great powers, and require an integrated political, military, and economic response if we are to minimize their impact on our security.

NOTES

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1. Clausewitz stated as much in his *On War* when he wrote, "Military institutions and the manner in which they employ violence depended on the economic, social and political conditions of their respective states." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1989), 6.
2. "Bin Laden Lieutenant Admits to September 11 and Explains Al-Qa'ida's Combat Doctrine: Special Dispatch Series No. 344, February 10, 2002," Middle East Media Research Institute.
3. Preaching Information Department, Global Islamic Media Front, "Fourth Generation Warfare," SITE Intelligence Group, www.siteintelgroup.org.
4. *Humanitarian Negotiations with Armed Groups: A Manual for Practitioners* (New York: UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs, 2006), 17, available at [www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/RURI-6LKSA9/\\$FILE/un-ocha-30jan.pdf?OpenElement](http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/lib.nsf/db900SID/RURI-6LKSA9/$FILE/un-ocha-30jan.pdf?OpenElement).
5. Mara Salvatrucha (MS or MS-13) is a violent criminal group founded by El Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles in 1980. Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, "Group Profile: Salvatruchas," MIPT Knowledge Base, www.tkb.org/Group.jsp?groupID=4486.
6. For a discussion of PMC political fallout, see Peter W. Singer, *Can't Win with 'Em, Can't Go to War without 'Em: Private Military Contractors and Counterinsurgency*, Policy Paper 4 (Brookings Institution, September 2007), available at www.brookings.edu/papers/2007/0927militarycontractors.aspx.
7. Chris Tomlinson, "US Hires Military Contractor to Back Peacekeeping Mission in Somalia," Associated Press, 7 March 2007.