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Delegation, Sponsorship, and Autonomy: An Integrated Framework for Understanding Armed Group–State Relationships

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Abstract

What types of relationships do armed groups have with states? How do different levels of ties and power relations affect both armed group and government behavior? This article develops a spectrum across which armed group–state relationships can move, focusing on three key types of relationships—delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy. An armed group–state relationship may be classified depending on the degree to which the armed group receives material or security support from a state, whether it pursues the strategic aims of the state, and the balance of power between the armed group and the state. I examine cases and empirical examples of relationships between states and armed groups ranging from criminal organizations to Cold War-era rebels to pro-government and communal militias to the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) and al-Qaeda. As lines between categories of armed groups and between state and non-state actors are increasingly blurred, the integrated framework enhances our ability to analyze the behavior and liabilities of both armed groups and states and to understand sources of leverage for protecting human rights and resolving conflicts.

Resumen

¿Qué tipo de relaciones mantienen los grupos armados con los Estados? ¿De qué manera influyen los diferentes niveles de vínculos y relaciones de poder en el comportamiento de los grupos armados y del gobierno? Este artículo establece un espectro en el que pueden moverse las relaciones entre grupos armados y Estados, y se centra en tres tipos clave de relaciones: delegación, patrocinio y autonomía. Una relación grupo armado-Estado puede clasificarse en función del grado en que el grupo armado recibe apoyo material o de seguridad de un Estado, en función de la búsqueda de los objetivos estratégicos del Estado y en función del equilibrio de poder entre el grupo armado y el Estado. En este artículo, analizo casos y ejemplos empíricos de relaciones entre Estados y grupos armados que van desde organizaciones criminales a rebeldes de la época de la Guerra Fría, pasando por milicias progubernamentales y comunales, hasta el Ejército de Resistencia del Señor y Al Qaeda. Dado que los límites entre las categorías de grupos armados y entre los actores estatales y no estatales son cada vez más difusos, la utilización de un marco integral mejora nuestra capacidad de analizar

Delegación, patrocinio y autonomía: Un marco integral para entender las relaciones entre grupos armados y los Estados
Délégation, soutien et autonomie: un cadre intégré pour la compréhension des relations entre groupes armés et États

el comportamiento y las responsabilidades tanto de los grupos armados como de los Estados, y de comprender las fuentes de influencia para proteger los derechos humanos y resolver los conflictos.

Résumé

Quels sont les types de relations que les groupes armés entretiennent avec les États? Comment les différents niveaux de liens et de relations de force affectent-ils à la fois le comportement des groupes armés et des gouvernements? Cet article développe un spectre sur lequel les relations entre groupes armés et États peuvent évoluer en se concentrant sur trois types clés de relations: Délégation, Soutien et Autonomie. Une relation entre un groupe armé et un État peut être classée selon le degré auquel le groupe armé bénéficie d'un soutien matériel ou sécuritaire d'un État, selon sa poursuite des objectifs stratégiques de l'État et selon l'équilibre des forces entre le groupe armé et l'État. J'examine des cas et des exemples empiriques de relations entre États et groupes armés allant des organisations criminelles aux rebelles de l'époque de la guerre froide en passant par les milices progouvernementales et municipales, l'Armée de résistance du Seigneur et Al-Qaïda. Les frontières entre catégories de groupes armés et entre acteurs étatiques et non étatiques étant de plus en plus floues, ce cadre intégré améliore notre capacité à analyser le comportement et les responsabilités des groupes armés et des États, ainsi qu'à comprendre les sources d'influence pour la protection des droits de l'homme et la résolution des conflits.

Keywords: armed groups, violence, non-state actors, delegation, sponsorship, autonomy

Palabras clave: grupos armados, violencia, actores no estatales, delegación, patrocinio, autonomía

Mots clés: groupes armés, violence, acteurs non étatiques, délégation, soutien, autonomie

Introduction

Contrary to the view that a monopoly on “legitimate violence” is the bedrock and key aspiration of modern states,¹ states have long delegated coercive actions on their behalf to actors ranging from pirates, mercantile companies, and mercenaries up through the nineteenth century, to rebel groups, warlords, militias, and private military companies today.² States have also sponsored armed groups for reasons unrelated to national security, such as ideological or identity affinity, whereas some armed groups remain autonomous, independent of state influence or support, or possessing equal power and capabilities in relation to weak states.

I argue that we must distinguish among armed actors by their level of autonomy *from* states or the ties they have *to* states. When examining armed groups beyond the official state security forces (military, police, intelligence services, and official paramilitaries), a small subset of armed groups has *no* direct connections to states in

terms of aid and/or strategic agenda setting, but for many their financing, materiel, or strategy depends at least in part on state actors.

Failing to critically investigate and highlight armed groups' links with states is not simply an academic issue: it obscures potential sources of leverage for conflict resolution efforts and legal accountability. I analytically review the existing literature on armed group–state relationships and then offer an original, integrated framework for categorizing armed group–state relationships as either delegation, sponsorship, or autonomy. This categorization is based on three factors. First, the level of material support (finance, supplies, and weaponry) or security support (training, safe haven, or advising and battlefield assistance) an armed group receives from the state actor. Second, whether or not an armed group acts to pursue the state's core strategic interests (alongside or in addition to the group's own aims). And third, the relative armed group–state power balance. The type of relationship an armed group has with a state (or states) can enable or constrain it.³ Furthermore, an armed group's level of

1 See [Newell \(2019\)](#) and [Thomas \(2021\)](#) on this norm's development and contestation, and [Owens \(2008\)](#) on its illusory nature empirically.

2 [Davis and Pereira \(2003\)](#) and [Marshall \(2016\)](#) place contemporary armed group–state relationships in historical perspective.

3 Armed groups may also have conflictual or cooperative relationships with each other (e.g., [Blair et al. 2021](#); [Powell and Florea 2021](#)), though these are beyond this article's scope.

connection to state actors implies different diplomatic, policy, and legal means to resolve or address armed conflicts.

After discussing the variety of armed groups active in global politics, I present the analytical framework and the categories of delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy, providing empirical examples from around the globe. The conclusion discusses this framework's implications for academic and policy audiences.

Conceptualizing Armed Group–State Ties

Non-state actors have become increasingly prominent in global politics and the field of international relations, with armed groups an important subset. To move beyond paradigmatic sectarianism (Lake 2011; Hayes and James 2014) and debates about non-state actors' role and importance in global politics, three empirical points are fundamental. First, a diverse group of state and non-state actors participate in global politics. Second, states remain the primary locus of global *political* authority, and the opportunity structures presented to non-state actors are determined at least partly by their relationships with states and states' decisions.⁴ Third, states can be constrained by their relationships with non-state actors. Weak or failed states may even possess less military power and political legitimacy than non-state actors within some or all of their territory.

In examining “violent non-state actors” or armed groups, I explicitly consider these actors based on their relationships with states. Armed group–state relationships are neither uniform nor static, and they can exist both during and outside of wartime.⁵ In states with fragmented and counterbalanced security forces (Böhme and Pilster 2015; Böhme and Clayton 2018; De Bruin 2018), different services may form relationships with different armed groups, who might only have allegiance to a particular faction within the state. For simplicity, I generally refer to “armed group–state relationships,” but this includes relationships with specific state actors.

Armed groups differ from other non-state actors in “resort[ing] to organized violence as a tool to achieve their goals” (Mulaj 2010, 3) and possessing the means

and ability to potentially “challenge the state at its own game” (Vinci 2009, 5). Armed groups have different organizational forms, tactics, and motivations, but are united in that they are not part of official state coercive apparatuses (the regular military, police forces, intelligence services, and official paramilitaries). Beyond that point of conceptual unity, scholarly definitions for armed groups or “violent non-state actors” have proliferated, covering groups ranging from gangs to militias to rebels to private military companies (see Krause and Milliken 2009 for an overview).

Armed groups themselves are often difficult to classify due to tactics and goals that cross categories commonly applied by analysts,⁶ or that shift over time (Schneekener 2007; Otto, Scharpf, and Gohdes 2020).⁷ The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka, for instance, were a secessionist ethnic rebel group that engaged in terrorism, but also acted as a guerrilla movement instituting governance structures in “liberated” territory (Mampilly 2011). The United Wa State Army in Myanmar are ethnic rebels who fight infrequently and engage in both governance activities and lucrative commerce, enjoying cooperative relations with the Chinese state and seeking autonomy within Myanmar, not independence (Ong 2018). The Islamic State has a networked structure and engages in terrorist attacks, but its affiliates have also sought to build transnational caliphates and engage in governance, analogous to other organizations with transnational revolutionary ideologies (Kalyvas 2015b; Revkin and Ahram 2020).

A more pressing issue from both an analytical and policy standpoint is the potential lack of separation between states and these “non-state” actors. Herring (2010, 184) argues persuasively that we should refer to armed groups rather than violent non-state actors because there is often a “mutual constitution and significant overlap” between armed groups, states, and international actors, with the lines between them “blurred and fluid.”⁸ Some armed groups, such as certain Russian-backed separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine (see Rauta 2016; Tamm 2019, 22–3), are heavily or “fully funded, armed, and managed by a state sponsor,” but even without clear

4 International, transnational, or supranational politics or relationships are conceptually impossible without nation-states existing (Goldmann 2002, 284).

5 For example, Staniland (2012b) and Biberman (2019) examine relationships between states, rebels, and militias during civil wars, but Ahram (2011) and Marten (2012) discuss state delegation relationships with militias and warlords during both peacetime and wartime.

6 Though similarities among armed groups in structures or behaviors do not necessarily signal “convergence” across types of groups (Kleinschmidt and Palma 2020).

7 The patterns of warfare in which states and armed groups engage are also often overlapping, rather than mutually exclusive, with states engaging in irregular warfare and armed groups using conventional tactics (Biddle 2021).

8 See also Davis (2003, 2009).

state influence over group behavior, the state/non-state distinction is “a difficult line to draw as many armed groups are funded by states to some degree” (Vinci 2009, 4). Beyond funding, armed groups can receive territorial or diplomatic shelter from states (Salehyan 2009), they may be founded by a state and later proceed to greater autonomy (Ahram 2011), or they may gain power in a region thanks to a state willingly devolving territorial control to them (Marten 2012).

The overlap between states and armed groups also defies attempts to paint states as legitimate and armed groups as monolithically illegitimate or illegal. State security forces or agencies may engage in illegal activities, or states may rely on armed groups to carry out technically illegal activities. In Sudan, for instance, the government “set up, armed and directed” Janjaweed militias that committed atrocities in Darfur (de Waal 2004, 724), while denying state responsibility and resisting international accountability (Cronogue 2013). Meanwhile, armed groups engage in many nonviolent activities or move back and forth between violent and nonviolent tactics, and they may garner legitimacy among segments of the population (Chenoweth and Lawrence 2010; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Petrova 2019). This variation is exemplified by Hezbollah in Lebanon, which was originally built up by Iran in the 1980s. While military attacks against Israel were key in gaining domestic legitimacy, Hezbollah has moved beyond violence to also become a political party and social service provider (e.g., Cammett 2014).⁹

States thus may engage in similar types of relationships with different types of armed groups, and armed groups may engage in different types of relationships with different states or state actors. To analyze this variation, the next section critically examines preexisting typologies of armed group–state relations and then offers a new framework, outlining three categories of armed group–state relationships: delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy.

Categorizing Armed Group–State Relationships

The form and level of connection between an armed group and state is both determined by the two sides’

strategic interests and affects their scope for action.¹⁰ A variety of factors may enable or constrain a state actor or armed group’s ability to initiate a relationship, including resources, domestic politics, ethnic or political affinities, etc. The dyadic relationship between an armed group and a state exists on a spectrum based on the degree of autonomy the armed group has from the state in terms of support, strategy, and power. This is determined by the relative level of influence a state actor exercises over the resources and actions of the armed group, and how the armed group’s policies and practices relate to state interests. Relationships fall into three broad categories—delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy. A spectrum implies we cannot necessarily cleanly categorize armed group–state relationships and that relationships can shift over time.

A number of preexisting typologies examine different forms of armed group–state relationships. Byman (2005) and Bale (2012) advanced spectrums of state support or engagement with terrorist organizations. Staniland (2015) typologized political party–armed group relationships around elections based on ideological compatibility and electoral utility; Carey and Mitchell (2017) categorize pro-government militias by relative linkage to the state and communities; and Biberman (2019) classifies domestic militia–state collaboration during civil war based on ideological interests and level of state “administrative” or “operational” control. Staniland (2012b) provided a “wartime political orders” typology of cooperative or collusive state–insurgent relationships in civil wars; Bennett (2013) offers a typology of state relationships with rebel groups when a cross-border safe haven exists; and Rauta (2020) categorizes battlefield operational relationships between state and non-state actors in “hybrid warfare.”

These are useful efforts devoted to specific types of actors and geographic or military situations. It can be difficult, however, to know which typology to apply when discussing armed group–state relations in countries with multiple types of armed groups, such as Colombia where rebel organizations, militarized cartels, and militia groups have all existed. Or when discussing groups that do not fit evenly into specific categories and evolve over time in organizational form and behavior and their relationships with states. As Schneekener (2007, 30) writes, “numerous grey zones exist as groups sometimes undergo transformations in the course of a conflict.

9 Hezbollah is highly institutionalized, but even smaller-scale militias and criminal organizations, too, may engage in social service provision and other forms of governance (Arias 2006; Barnes 2017; Biberman and Turnbull 2018).

10 This also applies to armed groups’ relationships with each other (Bapat and Bond 2012; Moghadam and Wyss 2020) and, for many groups, their relationships with civilian communities (Kaplan 2017).

Rebels... may turn into warlords; militias or warlords can degenerate into criminals.”

Two recent efforts have overcome some, but not all, of these issues. Staniland’s (2017, 460) “armed politics” framework allows for shifting armed group–state relationships over time and discusses multiple types of armed groups, but is restricted in scope “to groups that make public political demands of some sort and exist with a formal command structure for at least one year,” excluding “‘pure’ criminal organizations.” Criminal organizations, though, may engage in more cooperative relationships with state actors even in the absence of publicly expressed political demands (Arias 2006; Rodgers and Muggah 2009; Barnes 2017). Groups’ behavior may change in “more criminal” directions—for instance with some rebel groups, militias, or politically affiliated gangs focusing increasingly on illicit markets or extortion (Weinstein 2007; Leslie 2010; Dirx 2017, 287–95)—or in “more political” directions over time. Gangs in Brazil have developed increasing ties to politicians and state actors (Arias 2006; Barnes 2017; Bullock 2019), for instance, and criminal actors may even enter politics, as with Medellín cartel leader Pablo Escobar’s infamous congressional campaign.

Like with other types of armed groups, “crime-state relations are often fluid, shifting back and forth between these various arrangements over time” (Barnes 2017, 974). Groups with resource bases in illicit markets or extortion may have very different relations with the population and the state within the same country, such as leftist rebels and right-wing militias in Colombia (Gutiérrez Sanín 2008). Most importantly, the line between what is considered criminal or political is a *political judgment* (Tilly 1985; Bhatia 2005; Rodgers 2006), so while there may be distinct logics of conflict between criminal organizations and the state (Lessing 2015; Kalyvas 2015a), separating out criminal organizations is unnecessary in considering armed group–state relations more generally.¹¹

Armed group–state relations have often been discussed in a principal-agent framework, with states as principals and armed groups as their agents (Byman and Kreps 2010; Salehyan 2010; Bapat 2011; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), yet as Abbott et al. (2020) argue, principal-agent relationships are only one type of “indirect governance” involving relations between a governing actor and an intermediary. They present a typol-

ogy of relationships based on whether an intermediary has preexisting authority or if its authority is granted by the governor, and on whether the relationship is hierarchical or non-hierarchical, focusing on the governor’s ability to control and sanction the intermediary.

Abbott et al.’s (2020) “competence-control” framework has been applied to state relationships with rebel groups and militias (Salehyan 2020; Tamm 2020), but it remains too restrictive. Armed groups’ coercive power makes controlling and sanctioning them more costly and difficult than relations with other intermediaries. Even where states have helped form or empower an armed group, monitoring and compliance can be difficult, and states’ sanctioning threats are often tough to enforce (Marten 2012; Dirx 2017; Salehyan 2020), undermining hierarchy’s utility as a variable. While I use the term “delegation” to describe a type of armed group–state relations (see below), in contrast to its conceptualization in principal-agent and competence-control approaches (see Abbott et al. 2020), I do not assume that delegation relationships entail hierarchy or state actors’ ability to enforce their will on their armed group intermediaries.

Further, while Abbott et al. (2020) foreground conditions when armed group–state relationships begin, an armed group’s competencies and sources of authority are not necessarily static. For instance, Renamo, a Mozambican rebel group initially formed by the Rhodesian intelligence agency in a delegation relationship, over time gained its own domestic constituency and legitimacy (Manning 1998; Schafer 2001). This domestic support base enabled Renamo to become a political party after the war and then rearm for rebellion from 2012 to 2014 (Wiegink 2015). The Renamo case also reveals contradictions in seeing state actors as necessarily “granting” (Abbott et al. 2020) authority to groups when they establish relationships, since Renamo was not given *authority* possessed by the Rhodesian government—it was given arms, funding, and a task to undertake in territory where Rhodesia had no legal authority.

A New Integrated Framework of Armed Group–State Relations

To address the limitations noted above, this article shifts away from prior exercises in analytic differentiation (Collier and Levitsky 1997) and further up Sartori’s (1970) ladder of abstraction. My typology moves us toward a more general understanding of armed group–state relationships that may exist for groups using a range of organizational forms or tactics, with varying motivations and sources of authority, in wartime or peacetime, with or without cross-border refugees, and with or without

11 Staniland’s (2017) focus on degrees of cooperation or conflict without considering relative power dynamics also removes an important variable for understanding why particular relationships develop or change.

Table 1. Typology of armed group–state relationships

<i>Relationship type</i>	<i>Material/security support</i>	<i>Pursuit of state core security aims</i>	<i>Relative power balance</i>	<i>Areas of operations</i>
Delegation	Yes	Yes	State > armed group	Internal or transnational
Sponsorship	Yes	No or incidental	State > armed group	Transnational
Autonomy	Unnecessary	No or incidental	State \approx armed group	Internal or transnational

political–military ties between an armed group and any state.¹²

Transnational delegation to and sponsorship of external armed groups are common phenomena. Among 285 rebel groups active since 1945, 47 percent had “an explicit or widely accepted link with a foreign [state] patron” and a further 11 percent had alleged ties to an external patron (Salehyan 2010, 5–6). Surveying 74 post-Cold War insurgencies, Byman et al. (2001, 2) found “44 received state support that . . . was significant or critical to the survival and success of the movement.” The phenomenon is even more common in Africa, where declared interstate war is comparatively rare, but transnational conflicts involving states are extremely common (Twagiramungu et al. 2019). Craig (2012) found that 96 percent of African states have used “proxy” armed groups against an external rival at least once. Delegation internally is likewise common. Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe (2013) identified 332 pro-government militias globally from 1981 to 2007, with 88 countries (49 percent) having at least one pro-government militia.

Examining Cold War-era relationships between the superpowers and smaller allies they pushed to intervene in civil conflicts, Dunér (1981) developed a typology of intervening states’ status on two dimensions: whether or not they received and depended on patron state material support and whether or not they were pressured to intervene, categorizing states as proxies, partners, or autonomous actors.¹³ I modify this framework to capture the nature of armed group–state relationships as ideal types, distinguishing among delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy (see Table 1 above).¹⁴

Armed group–state relationships are disaggregated on four dimensions: (1) material and security support; (2)

pursuit of state aims versus independent security interests; (3) armed group power relative to the state in the group’s areas of operations; and (4) location. In delegation and sponsorship relationships, a state actor provides material support and/or protection to the armed group, supplying it with finance and materiel, and for a transnational armed group, sometimes using territorial sovereignty to protect it. Armed groups benefit from the support and protection, and can gain increased collective and personal power in the areas where they are active—though these relationships can also come at the cost of armed groups’ local legitimacy and popularity (see Tamm 2020). An autonomous armed group may receive some support from a state, as in the case of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (see below), but this is not necessary for the group’s survival or a determinant of its strategy. State actors hold the upper hand over armed groups in delegation and sponsorship relationships, possessing greater power and with armed groups’ success and survival depending to varying degrees on state support. It would be costly, but if state actors chose to, they could effectively sanction, undercut, or even eliminate these armed groups. Autonomous armed groups, however, have a level of approximate power symmetry or advantage in relation to states with which they interact; they do not depend on states and could not be suppressed easily by state forces. Finally, armed group–state ties may vary depending on their geographic location and whether armed groups are active within the state’s borders or abroad. While delegation or autonomous armed group–state relationships may take place within a state’s boundaries or abroad, sponsorship is a purely external, transnational phenomenon. I now turn to delegation, the tightest—and riskiest—relationship for both armed groups and states.

Delegation

The closest relationship between armed groups and states occurs when a state actor either cedes some of its ostensible “monopoly of violence” within its own territory or empowers an armed group to work extraterritorially to pursue the state’s foreign policy goals. State actors may create armed groups to carry out portions of their

12 Aydinli (2015) provides a similarly general framework, though at the systemic level, categorizing armed groups’ relationship to the international system, not to states.

13 Recent works update the state–state “proxy” relationship literature (Berman and Lake 2019; Ladwig 2017).

14 Delegation and sponsorship are sometimes treated as the same type of principal–agent relationship (Byman and Kreps 2010), but I conceptually separate them.

internal and external security strategies, or may enter into relationships with extant groups (Ahram 2011; Raleigh 2016; Biberman 2019; Salehyan 2020), for instance co-opting ethnic rebels to serve as pro-government militias (Christia 2012; Staniland 2012a). Salehyan (2009, 53) describes state direct support for rebel groups operating abroad as “security delegation, where a principal (the patron state) empowers an agent (the rebel group) to carry out some foreign policy objective,” though the armed group may still pursue its own goals. When states create armed groups, this initiates a delegation relationship, but such relationships can shift over time toward sponsorship or autonomy if an armed group develops its own social base and sources of finance and weapons, or if a state changes its policy to reduce engagement with the armed group or its theater of operations.

State actors have clear objectives in establishing delegation relationships with armed groups, though their purposes vary depending on the state’s strength, its security apparatus structure, and its relationships with neighbors or other external rivals. State actors generally want armed groups to act in a manner advancing the state’s core security interests, such as preserving territorial integrity and domestic political control and countering external rivals who might threaten them or might threaten key allies or crucial economic interests abroad.¹⁵ Delegation can be useful to states to reduce material and reputational costs, to make use of particular skills an armed group possesses, or as a signal of credible commitment for domestic or interstate bargaining (Byman and Kreps 2010; Salehyan 2010; Bapat 2011), but regardless, delegation involves armed groups undertaking tasks that state actors would pursue or would like to still pursue themselves absent the armed group’s collaboration.

Aims may also be shaped by constraints placed on state actions by capacity and/or international law and human rights norms (e.g., Poznansky 2019). A state may have limited military resources and wants to exert coercive influence in more dispersed areas by delegating to militias or warlords, but the state military in this case retains enough capacity to potentially manage and punish defection by its agents. A state may, by contrast, possess military capacity, but have a limited desire to exert coercive influence in a region due to its location or demographics, and so happily lets weak militias pick up the slack in security provision, as occurred in Northern

Uganda (Branch 2005).¹⁶ Or a state’s military capacity may be stretched thin by having to confront both internal and external threats (San-Akca 2016). Another possibility is that a state has capacity to pursue its strategies, but wants reduced legal liability or reputational costs for repression or illegal actions, and so delegates to actors outside the security forces. In Syria, the government of Bashar al-Assad initially relied on localized armed gangs to attack protesters and nascent rebels with plausible deniability, but later organized militias with closer ties to the state to boost fighting strength in the face of multi-front threats (Leenders and Giustozzi 2019). Finally, a state may have military capacity, but its government has a neoliberal ideology or has been captured by corporate or partisan interests, and so delegates coercive action to private military companies or party militias (Avant 2009; Staniland 2015). For armed groups themselves, the relationship may be formed to gain desired material capabilities and financial resources or political support, to bolster or formalize local control, to gain a safe haven, or to avoid conflict with the state actor and undermine shared enemies in a multi-actor conflict—though state actors might also forge relationships with multiple armed groups in the same setting to play them off each other and decrease the state’s reliance on any one group.

Delegating coercion is risky for state actors because armed groups may act against state interests, a situation of agency loss in a principal–agent framework (Byman and Kreps 2010; Salehyan 2010; Bapat 2011; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). Delegation can be a low-cost substitute for direct interstate military confrontation¹⁷ or risking state forces against rebels, but armed groups may undertake “actions that are not fully consistent with the preferences of the patron” (Salehyan 2009, 101).¹⁸ What is a problem for states, however, is a

15 In a state with a fragmented security apparatus, however, it is possible that a faction within the state could engage in a relationship with an armed group to advance the faction’s own interests, rather than core state security interests.

16 Uganda’s ruling National Resistance Movement government had few ties to Northern Ugandan ethnic groups and enduring hostilities from its seizure of power, and chose to direct its military and economic resources elsewhere.

17 Especially given escalation risks from competitive intervention to direct interstate conflict (Anderson 2019). States often deny delegation relationships to attempt to control escalation (Carson 2020; Cormac and Aldrich 2018).

18 Ahram (2011) suggests three ways armed groups can undermine state partners: engaging in counterproductive resentment-provoking violence; refusing to comply with states’ strategic commands regarding targeting; and consolidating their own power bases to potentially challenge the state.

feature for armed groups: they are unlikely to be willing to ever agree to a relationship in which a state actor had full control and sanctioning power over their behavior.

Internal Delegation

Delegation frequently occurs within a state's territory or in occupied territory in relationships with armed groups that may take different forms and names (e.g., death squads, civil defense forces, vigilantes), but are captured by the overarching term "militias" (Mazzei 2009; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015; Carey and Mitchell 2017; Tapscott 2019). Some militias are autonomous and locally focused, some collaborate with rebel organizations or political parties, and others support the government (Raleigh 2016; Böhmelt and Clayton 2018). Pro-government militias remain outside of official state security structures, even if they have ties to the state, and are thus distinct from paramilitaries, which are "militarized security units. . . trained and organized under the central government to support or replace the regular military" (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018, 198). Delegation to militias is useful generally to "add numbers or local knowledge, or to evade accountability for strategically useful violence" (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013). State actors view pro-government militias as sharing "characteristics of both the state and counter-state actors" (Ahram 2011, 10), operating in an extra-legal manner with state actors' endorsement and direction to fulfill their goals. Militias' roles may adapt over time, depending on their own interests and the types of threats states face (Ahram 2011; Carey and Mitchell 2017; Dirx 2017; Salehyan 2020).

Pro-government militias are sometimes formed by the state, but they may also develop autonomously as community defense forces, and then be brought into a delegation relationship (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015; Böhmelt and Clayton 2018; Salehyan 2020), as occurred with the Naparama movement in Mozambique (Jentzsch 2017). Or militias may be the forces of criminal organizations, collaborating with state actors and political parties to gain resources and protection from law enforcement, whether in exchange for controlling territory and fighting against rival criminal organizations (see Barnes 2017) or for turning out votes in contexts such as urban Brazil and Jamaica (Leslie 2010; Bullock 2019).

Militia delegation may be less useful for states engaged in a conventional war if used as a substitute for the military, a role better suited to more highly trained and formalized paramilitaries (see Böhmelt and Clayton 2018). In the Iranian case, when revolutionaries assumed power in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini and other clerics decided to maintain volunteer militias called *Basij*

as an armed political force separate from formal state structures (rejecting proposals to fold them into the national police), while also formalizing Islamist guerrillas into the paramilitary Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to provide a religious counterweight to the military (Ahram 2011; Axworthy 2013). At the start of the 1980–1988 war with Iraq, Basij forces struggled to collaborate with the IRGC and other state forces to respond to the Iraqi invasion. By 1981, the Basij were placed under IRGC command, who then used the poorly trained militia members, within Iran and across the Iraqi border, in misguided and costly human wave attacks against Iraqi conventional forces through the mid-1980s (Ahram 2011, 116–7; Karsh 1987; Axworthy 2013). After the war, the Basij were formalized into an official paramilitary subsidiary of the IRGC, and they and religious militias such as *Ansar-e Hezbollah* can be activated to repress dissent, often in "extra-legal" manners (Ahram 2011, 121).¹⁹

Iran now has a relatively strong central state to manage militias, yet in weaker states, armed groups may consolidate more independent power over certain regions. If a militia or former rebel group with personalistic leadership carves out significant territorial control in an area with state actors' "complicity" (Marten 2012, 3), its leader may be considered a warlord.²⁰ State actors have "created, tolerated, actively supported" warlords, though when warlords cease to fulfill their purposes, states have also "undermined and/or overthrown warlords" (Marten 2012, 2). Warlords may bargain with their own state and with foreign states—who may want to use a warlord's forces to destabilize the host—playing state actors off each other,²¹ while also collaborating with other non-state actors in global markets (Duffield 1998; Reno 1998).

Warlords depend on states and their sovereign or political protections, even if those states are weak or collapsing: warlords "are creatures of states and they feed off state resources" (Marten 2012, 21),²² arising

- 19 The case of the Basij also shows how "competition militias" (Raleigh 2016) controlled by specific political factions may be officially folded into the state security apparatus as paramilitaries if those political factions secure power.
- 20 This differs from the classical definition of warlords as state military commanders who carve out significant authority in a weak state, as in early-twentieth Century China (Hills 1997; Jackson 2003).
- 21 These relationships could shift into autonomy if the warlord organization is in a stronger bargaining position vis-à-vis states and lessens its dependence on them.
- 22 See also Hills (1997).

“through their interaction with one or more sovereign states, and the leaders of those states *will always have superior resources* that warlords cannot claim for themselves” (Marten 2012, 24 emphasis added). In weak or failed states, warlords can persist by forming relationships with external state actors or interveners (Mackinlay 2000; Jackson 2003; Marten 2012; Malejacq 2016), but some, such as Mohamed Farrah Aideed and others in 1990s Somalia, may exist autonomously, fighting foreign actors rather than allying with them (e.g., Menkhaus 2010). Delegation within the state’s own territory allows for indirect rule in peripheral areas, where warlords take advantage of state and sub-national boundaries to engage in cross-border arbitrage (Ahram and King 2011).

Without arrangements made with state actors, however, warlords would be forced to constantly fight states (Mackinlay 2000; Marten 2012). If they wish to exert themselves, states can generally rein in warlords (if the warlords lack powerful foreign patrons), though it is usually less costly to neglect accountability, leading to warlords’ persistence or their eventual incorporation into government, often with their military power intact (Marten 2012; Mukhopadhyay 2014; Driscoll 2015; Malejacq 2020).

The case of Russian delegation in Chechnya demonstrates that even militarily strong states willingly enter into relationships with warlords, and may even *create* warlords where they have not existed.²³ After two civil wars in the 1990s, bookending a brief period of Chechen independence, Russia regained control of its rebellious republic, but in the 2000s decided to “create a warlord on its own territory,” the former rebel Akhmat Kadyrov (Marten 2012, 102–3; see also Šmíd and Mareš 2015).²⁴ Economically weakened and with little political will for committing further Russian forces in Chechnya, delegation to Kadyrov offered a “low-cost method for achieving immediate, short-term security benefits,” regardless of long-term consequences (Marten 2012, 105).²⁵ Kadyrov consolidated his control over Chechnya, a project continued after 2004 by his son Ramzan, who suppressed rival militias and negotiated with Moscow for federal military forces’ withdrawal. Ramzan Kadyrov became both the official president of Chechnya and a major

general in charge of the Chechen branch of the Ministry of the Interior’s security forces—which were comprised of his private militia (Šmíd and Mareš 2015; Souleimanov 2015; Biberman 2019). Russia has continued to retain some control over Kadyrov’s ability to make legal economic deals with foreign investors (Marten 2012, 121), but he can make under-the-table agreements with foreign actors, who might tempt Kadyrov to take actions against Russian state interests.

Beyond territorial concerns, armed groups may also be seen by state leaders as useful domestic counterweights to other security forces for coup-proofing to preserve their power (e.g., Böhmelt and Pilster 2015; De Bruin 2018). Paramilitary forces tend to be better-resourced, trained, and controlled by state leaders, and so they are preferable for coup-proofing; especially in weaker and more unstable states, however, lower-cost militias can also be used for this purpose, even if they tend to be less reliable (Böhmelt and Clayton 2018; De Bruin 2018).²⁶ In contexts where leaders distrust other members of the government and strongly fear coups attempts or rebellion (Roessler 2016), they may turn for reliability and capabilities to private military companies, though these profit-motivated firms may also sometimes not fully fulfill state actors’ wishes (Avant 2009), committing counterproductive violence, shirking particularly risky tasks, or threatening non-renewal of contracts to extract more state resources.

Transnational rebels (Salehyan 2009; San-Akca 2016) being hosted by a government are most often given safe haven to have a base for attacking their home country, but they may also be pressed into service against rebellions or coup attempts. Mozambican rebels were used by the Rhodesian government to combat Zimbabwean nationalists domestically (Jackson 2011), for instance, whereas Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi relied on Malian and Nigerien insurgents to help defend him against domestic rebels in 2011 (Reuters 2011; Nossiter 2012).

Transnational Delegation

Externally, while states may engage in delegation relationships with warlords in based in the border region of a neighboring country (Ahram and King 2011), one of the most common delegation relationships is between

23 The United States, perhaps the strongest state in history, has recently cooperated heavily with warlords and armed groups in Afghanistan (Marten 2012; Saikal 2010) and Iraq (Ahram 2011; Herring 2010; Marten 2012).

24 See Driscoll (2015) on other post-Soviet warlords.

25 Akhmat Kadyrov in fact succeeded Russia’s previous Chechen warlord-of-choice, Bislan Gantamirov (Biberman 2019, 152–3).

26 In Yemen in 1962, for instance, pro-government tribal militias guarding the capital fled during a coup attempt, though they did then help deposed leader Muhammad al-Badi organize a rebellion against the new regime (De Bruin 2018, 1450).

a state actor and a rebel group operating against targets abroad. Such rebel groups often have bases in the delegating state's territory and fight at least in part in pursuit of the state actor's strategic interests. These transnational rebels, or TNRs, sometimes operate in the territory of weak states without those states' consent, such as Assamese rebels in Bhutan (Salehyan 2009, 45–6), but TNRs frequently are given safe havens, funding, supplies, and direction by states in delegation relationships. States use TNRs to impose costs on their rivals, often neighboring states, substituting delegation for interstate war (Salehyan 2009, 9) or states delegate to TNRs to avoid overextending while also combatting insurgents at home (San-Akca 2016).²⁷ Sovereignty legally precludes states from invading or directly interfering in one another's domestic affairs, so TNRs provide a means of indirect interference, and with very limited "hot pursuit" rights for target states pursuing TNRs across the border into the delegating patron state—though states frequently break these laws.

In the Nicaraguan case, Honduras and Costa Rica allowed the Contra rebel groups to establish bases in their territories and Honduras actively helped the Contras recruit Nicaraguan refugees, whereas the United States funded and logistically supported the Contras (Kornbluh 1988; Dillon 1991). These actions were partly retaliation for Nicaraguan support for leftist rebels in El Salvador, but also aimed to destabilize and preferably topple Nicaragua's revolutionary government. Outside support was necessary for Contra success and survival. The peace process only moved forward after assurances Honduras, Costa Rica, and the United States would end support for the Contras (Jarquín 2019), and the Contras, other than indigenous rebels on the Caribbean coast, remained dependent on their patrons. A Central Intelligence Agency (CIA 1984, 1) assessment suggested withdrawing US aid would "effectively remove the military threat posed by [the FDN] within four to six weeks," while "Without safe havens inside [Nicaragua], the Contras' ability to flee into Honduras and Costa Rica prevented their demise" (Salehyan 2009, 130,132).

Africa's Great Lakes region provides another example of the web of state rivalries and delegation to armed groups that exists in regions where conflicts "cluster" (Weiner 1996). After the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebels, previously hosted by Uganda, took over Rwanda following the 1994 genocide, elements of the deposed Hutu regime took refuge in Zaire; welcomed

by Mobutu Sese Seko's government, they formed a rebel movement (Prunier 2008). In response, the RPF government conducted cross-border raids and began delegating to Zairean Tutsis, molding them into an armed group and uniting them with the Laurent Kabila-led AFDL-Congo rebels to topple Mobutu and attack Hutu forces in Zaire, leveraging the domestic actors' "better knowledge of the terrain and the local population" (Salehyan 2009, 151). Once in power, however, Kabila turned on Rwanda and began supporting the Hutu rebels, leading Rwanda to support a new rebel movement along with Uganda, who also were fighting against rebels hosted in the renamed Democratic Republic of the Congo (Prunier 2008; Salehyan 2009; Tamm 2016, 2020). A host of other states intervened, creating what has been called "Africa's World War" (Prunier 2008), with Sudan and Uganda even delegating fighting in their interstate rivalry to rebel groups battling in the Congo (Prunier 2004; Tamm 2016).

Former allies turning against their erstwhile state partner or harming its interests has also happened to Pakistan in multiple relationships. Rebel agents to whom it delegated fighting against Indian forces in Jammu and Kashmir have in some cases defected, or they have developed ties to extremist armed groups within Pakistan that have attacked the Pakistani state and civilians (Byman and Kreps 2010; Popovic 2015). In Afghanistan, Pakistani intelligence helped the Taliban rise to power in the 1990s (e.g., Rashid 2001) and have sought to retain influence in the country. This contributed to regional instability due to the Taliban's support for al-Qaeda and war with the United States after 2001. It has also increased violence within Pakistan by attracting US drone strikes against suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in the country and by the Taliban not only inspiring, but also collaborating with Pakistani militant groups such as Tehrik-i-Taliban that have attacked their own government. Pakistan's problems may grow after the 2021 withdrawal of United States ground forces from Afghanistan and the Taliban's return to power (CNN 2021; Haqqani 2021).

Delegation is the tightest *strategic* armed group–state relationship and thus offers states the highest potential rewards, reducing costs in foreign policy, domestic repression, and/or controlling the periphery. But delegation also holds the highest risks of state actors seeking to impose their will on armed groups, or armed groups acting in contravention of state interests. These dynamics play out to a lesser degree in sponsorship relationships.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship, like delegation, involves a state providing financial or material support and advice or training to

27 In some cases states may both delegate and engage in international war, invading alongside rebels, since "domestic insurgents. . .[have] better local knowledge and domestic legitimacy" (Salehyan 2009, 45).

an armed group, with the key difference that the state actor in a sponsorship relationship does not seek to fulfill its own core security aims. Delegation occurs when states wish to use armed groups for domestic or foreign policy aims at the center of their security strategy; in sponsorship relationships, a state has little or nothing to gain from the armed group's success in terms of its own core security interests, but holds a secondary "national interest" in supporting the group, often due to ideological or identity affinity.²⁸ For this reason, sponsorship generally takes place outside of the sponsoring state's own region, since support for armed groups in neighboring states tends to have intended security benefits for a state's own territorial integrity, and would thus constitute delegation. Sponsorship should *not* occur with domestic groups, since states will only willingly cede control over coercion within their own territory for core strategic reasons—though they may allow a sponsored group with foreign aims to train in their territory. For armed groups themselves, sponsorship relationships can offer financing, materiel, and potential diplomatic support, and may be accompanied by the sponsor leveraging its sovereign status to sanction or otherwise pressure the target government.

During the Cold War, Cuba frequently sponsored leftist rebel movements in addition to direct interventions and delegation in civil wars. Following its own revolution, Cuba committed to supporting other Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries based on ideological affinity, even when it contradicted Cuban economic interests (Domínguez 1989, 7). Cuba sponsored rebel movements closer to home in Latin America, but also in far-flung countries such as Morocco and the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo. This activity slowed with the end of civil wars in Central America and the Cold War, and Cuba ceased support for Colombian guerrilla groups in the early 1990s (Byman 2005, 35), though it at times remained involved in diplomatic efforts to resolve Colombia's civil war. North Korea engaged in similar ideologically motivated sponsorship relationships with leftist militant organizations around the world (Young 2021).

On the other side of the Cold War, the United States sponsored rebel movements for their opposition to leftist governments, such as Chinese Kuomintang exiles based in Myanmar in the 1950s (Winn 2019), the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan fighting against the Afghan communist regime and its Soviet backers (Coll 2005), and UNITA

in Angola in the 1980s and early 1990s (Minter 1991). Through the CIA, the United States also helped support and supply right-wing armed groups in Western Europe who carried out terrorist attacks and worked to counter or discredit leftist movements (Ganser 2005).

Libya under Muammar Qaddafi supported a range of rebel movements throughout sub-Saharan Africa as part of an anti-imperialist, anti-American, and anti-Israeli foreign policy. Libya sponsored and trained groups fighting in countries such as Burkina Faso and Liberia that lacked core strategic value to Libya, and in which there was never consideration of deploying Libyan troops (Haynes 1990; Huliaras 2001). Libya also worked to arm and train European separatist movements including the Irish Republican Army and Basque ETA militants (Davis 1990). Sudan offers another example of sponsorship, hosting al-Qaeda out of ideological affinity, rather than as a component of national or international strategy (Vinci 2009, 112).

For armed groups, sponsorship is usually a positive, though if the state sponsor is unpopular, it may harm an armed group's domestic legitimacy (cf. Tamm 2020). Easy availability of external resources or excessive attention to foreign audiences can lead groups to neglect domestic constituencies and lose support (Jumbert and Lanz 2013; Weinstein 2007). A "safe haven" may also turn into a liability for a sponsored armed group if the host state fears retaliation from the group's foreign target more than it values the group (Carter 2012). Like with delegation, a sponsored armed group's actions may cause a state sponsor problems, as Sudan discovered facing missile strikes in retaliation for al-Qaeda's 1998 attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Al-Qaeda was also invited to its next base, in Afghanistan, but its relationship with the Taliban government was an alliance, not sponsorship: with own wealth, military power, and clear strategic goals, al-Qaeda was autonomous.

Autonomy

Autonomy here means the degree to which an actor exercises control over its own decision-making and actions.²⁹ Autonomous groups "determine for themselves their internal and external relations without the interference

29 Armed groups may receive political or ideological advice from states while still maintaining strategic, operational, financial, and armament autonomy. This was the case with many early Marxist-Leninist movements advised by Eastern Bloc countries and some contemporary armed groups influenced by Saudi-promoted Wahhabi Islamism.

28 I focus on "core security interests" as these are more central to the state, whereas the "national interest" is more contested (e.g., Burchill 2005).

of anyone, including the state” (Vinci 2009, 5). No actor in global politics is perfectly autonomous, always shaped partly by the structures within which it operates (Wendt 2009), but armed groups can be more or less dependent on state actors, with autonomous armed groups asymptotically approaching complete independence.

Autonomy as a concept can be applied to both the armed group and state actor in a dyadic relationship, with the degree of autonomy in the relationship potentially varying over time as an armed group moves toward or away from sponsorship and delegation.³⁰ Autonomous armed groups are those either (1) fully independent of state influence, (2) lacking relationships with states other than potentially fighting them, and/or (3) entering into relationships with weak states compared to which they have greater or symmetrical power in their areas of operations. In many parts of Latin American countries (Duran-Martinez 2015; Villa, Braga, and Ferreira 2021) or in Russia (Stephenson 2017), for instance, gangs or criminal organizations have equal or greater power and control compared to the state, and may engage in varying cooperative, co-optive, or conflictual relationships with state actors—or they may even be left to their own devices in areas where the state is unwilling to or uninterested in projecting power.³¹

An armed group–state alliance, as with an interstate alliance, may lead one or both actors to lose autonomy by being “chain-ganged” (e.g., Snyder 1997) into a conflict they would otherwise have avoided, and so stronger states are only likely to ally with armed groups over which they can exercise significant leverage in a delegation relationship. Weaker states may have less choice, finding autonomous armed groups’ military capabilities appealing, or believing they have greater control over armed groups than they do.

Al-Qaeda and the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) are armed groups that have, at times, had autonomous relationships with states. As mentioned above, Sudan invited al-Qaeda to use its territory as a base in a sponsorship relationship. In 1996, following international diplomatic pressure on Sudan to evict al-Qaeda, the group moved to Afghanistan. The Taliban government welcomed al-

Qaeda out of Islamist solidarity and sought to take advantage of al-Qaeda’s financial and military resources to help consolidate control throughout Afghanistan (Byman 2005; Saikal 2010). The relationship was not one of delegation, in which the Taliban would have used al-Qaeda to substitute for its own resources or actions; instead there was an alliance between al-Qaeda and the state, in which al-Qaeda exchanged money and participation in fighting for the use of territory, but maintained its strategic and operational autonomy (Vinci 2009, 118–9). Al-Qaeda frequently acted against Taliban interests, but it could not be held to account and was even a potential patron for warlords (Marten 2012, 190). It is uncertain if the Taliban would actually have been able to comply with US demands to capture and handover al-Qaeda leadership after the September 11 attacks had they wanted to, due to the power symmetry in the armed group–state relationship and the Taliban’s incomplete control over Afghan territory (Salehyan 2009, 52; Van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012). The alliance ultimately led to the Taliban government’s demise and it took the Taliban a two-decade fight to regain control of Afghanistan.³²

The LRA formed as an ethnic rebel group among the Acholi people in Northern Uganda in the 1980s, developing into a notoriously brutal and elusive transnational rebel organization. Initially, the LRA was autonomous, fighting only against the Ugandan government without foreign support. In the early 1990s, however, the Sudanese government began giving the LRA military aid, funding, and territorial shelter as part of a pattern of delegation with Ugandan rebel groups after 1986 to destabilize Uganda and preoccupy its security forces (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Prunier 2004). Sudan also relied on the LRA to attack the Ugandan-supported Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan (Prunier 2004; Tamm 2016; Vinci 2009), joining a complex of militias to whom Sudan delegated the anti-SPLA fight on the periphery (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; van Acker 2004).

The LRA became autonomous again when, in 2002, Sudan and Uganda agreed to cease supporting each other’s rebel movements and shifted to direct diplomacy. The end of Sudanese support led the LRA to begin attacking Sudanese civilians and military forces (Vinci 2009, 92–3, 103). The Ugandan government could only pursue and inflict serious damage on the LRA after Sudanese support stopped (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Salehyan 2009). Subsequently, the LRA became nomadic, moving

30 Lemke (2003) and Vinci’s (2009) realist approach treats armed groups as autonomous actors in international relations because they engage in “the same sort of relations as between one state and another—wars, negotiations, and alliances” (Vinci 2009, 5). Yet this oversimplifies the array of potential ties between states and armed groups and states’ own autonomy in the global system.
31 See Barnes (2017, 2021), Lessing (2015), and Rodgers and Muggah (2009) for broader overviews.

32 Al-Qaeda over time became a decentralized “brand” with differing regional franchises (Phillips 2019; Zelinsky and Shubik 2009).

between now-independent South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, seeking survival and sticking to peripheral areas of limited state influence, but not entering into known new sponsorship or delegation relationships with state actors (Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Vinci 2009, 109). The LRA thus traveled across the spectrum of armed group–state relations, from autonomy to delegation and back to autonomy.

Contexts where state control has been severely weakened or collapsed are particularly hospitable for autonomous armed groups, whether or not they have state support.³³ The exiled Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), for example, was welcomed into Lebanon out of ideological solidarity. In the 1970s, when the state was very weak, the PLO provided more robust and cohesive governance to both Palestinian refugees and Lebanese citizens; it at times undermined and fought with the state, and at others the PLO “propped up or ‘guaranteed’ the Lebanese state” (Stel 2017, 367–8). After the Lebanese Civil War, the PLO was greatly weakened in Lebanon and the state began to strengthen, leading to a delegation relationship from the 1990s on, in which the state entrusted the PLO with control in Palestinian refugee camps (Stel 2017).

In contexts ranging from Côte d’Ivoire (Martin 2021; Martin, Piccolino, and Speight 2020) and Liberia (Themnér 2015) to Afghanistan (Blair and Kalmanovitz 2016; Malejacq 2020), armed groups and subnational commanders have carved out autonomy and resisted the imposition or reimposition of central authority after civil wars. Menkhaus (2010) discusses the case of Somalia after the state disintegrated in 1991 and the country fragmented into fiefdoms controlled by various clan-based factional militias and cross-clan warlord organizations. While some Somali armed groups have sought productive relationships with the international community and states such as Ethiopia, others have continued to exist autonomously, spurning and attacking foreign actors and nascent national governments. Somalia today has become relatively more stable and central authority has been partially reconstituted with international aid and intervention, yet autonomous armed gangs, militias, pirate organizations, and the quasi-states of Somaliland and Puntland remain. The most powerful armed group

in Somalia, al-Shabaab, is likewise autonomous—despite limited Eritrean support in the past (Menkhaus 2010).

Conclusion

Armed groups control and affect areas populated by millions of people around the globe, offering either governance or a threat to lives and livelihoods (Englehart 2016; Mampilly 2011, 6), and armed groups can be either buffers reducing the probability of interstate war or exacerbating factors increasing intrastate and interstate conflict (Marten 2012). Understanding armed groups’ role in global politics requires examining their relationships with states. Other actors beyond states can enter into delegation or sponsorship relationships with armed groups, such as refugees and diasporas abroad (Byman et al. 2001; Lischer 2005; Petrova 2019; Salehyan 2009) or multinational corporations (Johnston 2008; Ross 2004), but state actors remain the most prominent and powerful supporters of armed groups.

I have offered a typology of armed group–state relationships emphasizing the degree of relative autonomy of an armed group and how its actions relate to the strategic aims of a supporting state. Table 2 presents selected armed group–state relationships discussed in the article to see variation in relationships across different states and armed groups, including potential evolution of relationships over time.

Much of the discussion has not differentiated between types of armed groups. It is certainly possible that state actors will engage in different types of relationships with rebel organizations or armed transnational criminal organizations than they would with militias, but states may rely on similar types of relationships with armed groups across different scales and forms. Given that distinctions between types of armed groups are often blurred, a conceptual framework considering various types of armed groups together can be particularly useful for mapping individual states’ relationships with different types of armed groups.

The typology also provides enhanced means to analyze armed group and state behavior and to determine what sources of leverage exist for outside actors to resolve conflicts (e.g., Maekawa 2019; Marshall 2019; Tamm 2019); carry out disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of armed group members; or seek legal accountability. This improved understanding is essential in tackling contemporary security and human rights challenges, be they global, international, or domestic.

In trying to shape or react to armed group behavior, state actors are useful targets for advocacy and legal pressure in delegation or sponsorship relationships, but in

33 Groups that appear weak, such as tribal militias, may still be autonomous, persisting and having power parity in their areas of operations in “failed” and weak states that cannot project force throughout their territory (e.g., “parochial” armed groups in Reno 2011).

Table 2. Selected armed group–state relationships

<i>Armed group</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Relationship</i>
AFDL-Congo	Rwanda, Uganda	Delegation
Al-Qaeda	Sudan	Sponsorship
Al-Qaeda	Afghanistan (Taliban government)	Autonomous
Contra forces (Nicaragua)	Honduras, United States	Delegation
Eastern Ukraine separatist rebels	Russia	Delegation
Ejército de Liberación Nacional (Colombia)	Cuba	Sponsorship
Irish Republican Army	Libya	Sponsorship
Janjaweed militias	Sudan	Delegation
Kadyrov forces (Chechnya)	Russia	Delegation
PLO (1970s–1980s)	Lebanon	Autonomous
PLO (1990s)	Lebanon	Delegation
Renamo (1976–1980)	Rhodesia	Delegation
Renamo (2012–2014)		Autonomous
UNITA (Angola)	United States	Sponsorship

responding to autonomous armed groups, those operating in weak or failed states may perhaps best be engaged with as de facto subnational governments. In these instances, if armed groups “truly are the least bad alternative” (Marten 2012, 200), it may be best for international actors to deal directly with armed groups and encourage the devolution of security, seeking the provision of “good enough governance” for basic stability and human security, rather than trying to rebuild state capacity (Afram 2011; Murtazashvili 2016).

This approach holds some promise—and human rights advocacy can restrain armed groups’ use of violence if they are open to it (Jo 2015; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Stanton 2016)—but it can also offer perverse incentives, encouraging substate interest groups to take up arms to achieve influence with the international community (Kydd and Straus 2013), or leading armed groups to commit atrocities to attract international attention (e.g., Autesserre 2012). The short-term stability provided by armed groups also comes with long-term costs of institutionalizing state weakness, and once power is granted to armed groups, it is difficult to recoup (Marten 2012, 200; Mukhopadhyay 2014).

At the cross-national level, new, more granular data sources can enable better analysis of armed groups’ relationships with states and with each other (Blair et al. 2021; Otto, Scharpf, and Gohdes 2020; Powell and Florea 2021). While I have advanced a general framework, however, with any armed group–state relationship—as with conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts more broadly (Autesserre 2017)—careful, contextualized analysis is necessary for policy or practitioner responses to make the most of both local and international knowledge and resources.

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