Non-state Armed Groups as a Threat to Global Security: What Threat, Whose Security?

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Abstract

What kind of security threats do non-state armed groups pose, and to whom? The literature has tended to take the state as a reference point for the study of non-state armed groups: insurgents have long been regarded as domestic military threats, and since 9/11, terrorism has been increasingly treated as a major transnational military threat. Because literature on armed non-state actors typically situates them in the context of war or protracted conflict, the state-centric and militarized view of these groups is rarely contested. However, data on 232 armed groups in twenty-three Asian countries from 1985 to 2014 show that the primary threat such groups most consistently pose is to the human security of local civilian populations, rather than the military security of states. A human security perspective suggests alternatives to military responses, the need for more tailored non-military interventions, and the necessity of improved data collection on non-state armed groups that exist in- and outside the context of conventional war.

Keywords: human security, non-state armed groups, military security, civil war, human rights

What kind of security threats do non-state armed groups pose, and to whom? Such groups—militias, terrorists, insurgents, criminal gangs and the like—are often characterized as military threats in policy discourse. However, they have more complex security effects, including on human security. The Islamic State (IS), for instance, is widely regarded as a transnational security threat. However, it arguably poses an even more significant human security threat to civilians in the areas it controls. Most seriously, in August 2014, IS embarked on a genocidal massacre of the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq (Arraf 2014). IS fighters killed adult males, enslaved and raped women and children, and forcibly converted survivors. The United States was already aiding the Iraqi government against the IS insurgency, but the humanitarian horror inflicted on the Yazidis provoked the United States into further action, including airstrikes. The first direct US military action against the group, therefore, was triggered by the human security threats it posed, rather than military security.

Another set of non-state armed groups, the Kurdish peshmerga militias, helped thousands of Yazidi refugees escape following US airstrikes. These included the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Iraq and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, groups that subsequently cooperated with Turkey to force IS out of the Syrian border town of Kobani. The genocidal IS attack on the Yazidis and the Kurdish cooperation in rescuing them demonstrate how non-state armed groups affect human security.

Yet, in August 2015, Turkey’s shelling of IS positions in Syria expanded to include the Kurdish peshmergas that had aided it a year before (Peker and Albayrak 2015). The Turkish government has long viewed the peshmergas as a military security threat because of the group’s links to Kurdish secessionists in Turkey. The US airstrikes against IS, and Turkey’s cooperation with, and subsequent shelling of, the peshmergas, all represent standard state approaches to non-state armed groups.

Research on the microdynamics of conflict, which stresses the rebel organization as the unit of analysis...
A Human Security Approach to Non-state Armed Groups

A primary criticism of the term “human security” is definitional; the broad range of potential threats that fit within this term may dilute its relevance in policy and scholarly debates. If this label includes all imaginable harms that might befall individuals, it becomes useless, or even counterproductive (see, e.g., Paris 2001; Buzan 2004). For example, senior officials within the United Nations (UN) stopped using the term out of concern that its breadth and imprecision might commit the institution to expansive policies beyond its capacities (Martin and Owen 2010). For the purposes of this paper, human security refers to localized threats posed by non-state armed groups to individuals and communities.

Focusing on the human security threats to civilians posed by non-state armed groups sidesteps the aforementioned problem. Unlike many other definitions of human security threats, the nature of the harm is direct and easily observable rather than “structural” (Galtung 1969). The threats and harms are directly attributable to political actors with agency who use violence. Importantly, however, this concept differs from traditional definitions of military security because the referent is the human being rather than the state. Hence, my definition falls somewhere between conceptions of state-based military security and the most expansive versions of human security.

Non-state armed groups are very diverse; what unifies them as an analytical category is their capacity to use organized violence without the official sanction of a public authority. Although the typical conception of non-state armed groups includes insurgents and terrorists, there are other kinds. Governments sometimes foster the creation of non-state armed groups to attack their enemies (see, e.g., Campbell and Banner 2000; Rodriguez 2010; Carey et al. 2012). Other groups are essentially criminal enterprises, using violence to generate revenue (Rosenthal 2008). Yet, all of these groups share a common attribute: they can use organized violence, something normally reserved to the sovereign state, without being subject to public authorization or accountability.

Non-state actors may also be a source of security for local communities, protecting them from other non-state armed groups or predatory agents of the state (Ball and Lang 2001; Baker 2007; Reno 2007). They may even provide governance in the absence of functioning state institutions (Mampilly 2011). We may thus see a range of human security impacts from non-state armed group activity, ranging from predatory violations of human security to governance designed to improve it.

If non-state armed groups are primarily a threat to military security, we would expect to find their violence (1) projected across borders in ways that violate the sovereign responsibility of states to maintain order and protect residents from foreign harms, or (2) aimed most frequently against government targets. Conversely, if non-state armed groups are primarily a human security threat, we would expect to see most of their violence aimed at local civilians, both in and out of warzones. These are testable propositions that require new data to evaluate.

Non-state Armed Groups Dataset: A New Resource

Existing quantitative research on non-state armed groups tends to suffer from selection bias: it is restricted to subsets of non-state armed groups that exhibit certain forms of behavior of interest to the researcher, typically violence involving the military security of states, that is, terrorism (e.g., Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism data) or active insurgency (e.g., Cunningham et al.’s [2013] data on rebel groups).1 Typical data on non-state armed actors are therefore incomplete: groups drop out if their behaviors

1 Exceptions include Carey et al.’s (2012) database on pro-government armed groups, which excludes groups not supported by governments; and the Minorities at
change, even while they continue to operate. For instance, non-state armed groups not actively engaged in conflict with governments are omitted from the Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan data. Pro-government groups that switch sides and become insurgents will drop out of the Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe data. In both cases, groups are likely to continue to operate, displaying new patterns of interaction with civilians that go unrecorded. The available data also tend to privilege more spectacular and state-centered forms of violence such as terrorism and civil war, and underplay more quotidian abuses that typically fall under the lens of human security.

Hence, I collected these data to reflect a wider universe of non-state armed groups involving the following criteria. Groups must (1) have an armed strength of at least 100 at some point in their existence; (2) possess firearms or explosives; (3) persist at least one year; and (4) have an identifiable command structure.2 Government-supported groups are included, but only if they do not come under the command structure of state security forces.3 The data include insurgent groups that have reached ceasefire agreements with governments but have not disarmed; such groups may cease to be a military security threat but continue to interact with civilians.

The scope of the data includes 232 non-state armed actors in twenty-three Asian countries from 1985 to 2014.4 Asia yields an extremely diverse set of countries in terms of economic development, level of democracy, conflict history, culture, colonial legacies, size, population, terrain, and religious and ethnic diversity. Because some groups operate across borders, it is most productive to investigate bordering countries in turn.

To capture change over time, the data are in a group-year format similar to the country-year format used in cross-national time-series data sets, widely employed to analyze the dynamics of state behavior over time. Each observation represents one year for each group, with a total of 3,975 group-years. This structure means that groups do not need to be characterized according to their behavior at a single point in time (i.e., insurgent, pro-government militia, terrorist, etc.). Instead, we can analyze group behavior as it changes.

The quantity and quality of the information available differs immensely by group. There are a handful of groups on which voluminous academic work and thousands of media reports are available, while there is another handful for which there are very few sources.5 Because of the variable quantity and quality of information, we coded many variables as dummies. This includes variables concerning human rights abuses, the resourcing of groups, their administrative activities, and any services they might provide.

The Data Described

Non-state Armed Groups as a Military Security Threat

Based on descriptive statistics, the data do not appear to support the claim that non-state armed groups pose persistent military security threats across borders. Only 2.2 percent of group-years featured cross-border attacks, meaning attacks into contiguous countries in which the groups had no bases. Furthermore, only twenty-two of the 232 groups launched all of these cross-border attacks.

Four of these twenty-two groups are supported by the Pakistani military’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. These groups conduct operations in Indian Kashmir, and together account for over two-thirds of the cross-border attacks recorded in the data.6 Another six are militias formed by the Indonesian military to terrorize East Timor at the time of the 1999 independence referendum. These Indonesian-sponsored militant groups retreated to West Timor but continued to make cross-border attacks into independent Timor Leste in 2000 and 2001. Together, these ten groups best fit the classic interpretation of cross-border attacks: they are state-sponsored proxy forces used to undermine the security of neighboring states (see, e.g., Maoz and San-Arca 2012).

5 No groups were included for which there was only one source available; in practice, this resulted in the exclusion of only one group.

6 Several other ISI-supported groups conduct attacks in Kashmir, but these have bases on Indian territory and in Pakistan, so their operations are not coded as cross-border attacks.
These are the only groups in the data that follow a consistent strategy of conducting attacks in neighboring countries in which they have no bases. Other groups conduct cross-border attacks more sporadically. For instance, Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province launched an abortive campaign against forces within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2002 (Ali and Khan 2010). Other groups have engaged in cross-border attacks for opportunistic reasons, or because they were compelled by circumstances. God’s Army, for instance, intruded on Thai territory from Myanmar to seek food and medical care (Ball and Lang 2001).

Some accounts suggest that it is a common strategy for insurgents to conduct attacks cross-border and then retreat to safe bases on foreign soil. For instance, some press reports of Taliban attacks into Afghanistan in the mid-2000s seemed to indicate that they operated from bases in Pakistan, with no permanent presence in Afghanistan. However, they actually enjoyed a network of safe houses, sympathetic villages, and small bases in Afghanistan that supported their attacks (Giustozzi 2008). Thus, these do not count as cross-border attacks by the definition used here—attacks into contiguous countries in which the group does not have bases.

We could relax the definition of cross-border attacks to include all groups conducting operations in more than one country at a time, but there are still relatively few such groups. Only forty-eight of the 232 groups in the data set have conducted operations in more than one country at the same time, amounting to 201 group-years, about 5 percent of the total. Somewhat more—sixty-eight of the 232—have at one time had bases in more than one country. This is a strategy of prudence: by having bases in more than one country, groups can hedge their bets and more easily maintain safe zones. Most of these groups operate primarily in one country and avoid antagonizing their host governments.

As Table 1 shows, the number of country-years in which groups conduct attacks in more than one country is, by any arrangement of the evidence, very small. Even if we consider all groups, we still see attacks in more than one country in only 6.4 percent of group-years. Groups with bases in more than one country are slightly more likely to conduct attacks in more than one country, but only by 1.2 percent.

Not all cross-border attacks target governments. Here, I assume that all cross-border operations represent a threat to military security because they involve breaching a sovereign state’s territory, but this assumption is actually questionable. For instance, the National Liberation Front of Tripura’s one attack on Bangladeshi territory was actually against the camps of its rival, the All Tripura Tiger Force. Such attacks only marginally fit traditional conceptions of military security.

Attacks into countries that do not have a contiguous border with one in which the group has a base are characterized here as “transnational” to distinguish them from more straightforward attacks across contiguous land borders. These represent the 9/11-style attacks that so transfixed some policymakers and security scholars in the early 2000s. Such transnational attacks are even more rare. They occur in only 0.4 percent of group-years. Only seven groups out of the 232 are responsible for such attacks. This may be because they are typically more difficult to plan and execute than cross-border attacks, or there may be less motivation to do so.

Although terrorist attacks far from a group’s base of operations may create widespread fear and disruption (as they are intended to do), their incidence is extremely low. It is difficult to collect consistent data on the magnitude of attacks, but the worst cross-border attack in the data is probably the 2008 Lashkar-e-Taiba attack on Mumbai.7

Attacks of this magnitude are extremely rare. The threat presented by transnational and cross-border attacks is thus mitigated by their extremely low incidence.

Many non-state armed groups clearly pose security threats to their own governments. Of the 232 groups in the data, 171 were opposed to the host government at one time, equating to over 70 percent. However, groups often go back and forth between opposition to the government, ceasefires, and cooperation. Groups are in active conflict with governments in only 53 percent of group-years.

Table 1. Attacks in multiple countries by groups with bases in one or more than one country (% group-years)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bases in</th>
<th>1 country</th>
<th>More than 1 country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attacks in</td>
<td>1 country</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 1 country</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All differences significant at .01 level or better.

7 D Company’s 2006 train bombing in Mumbai comes a close second for magnitude, but counts as an instance of domestic terrorism because the group was primarily based in India.
Moreover, not all opposition groups are equally aggressive. Groups are coded on a scale of relationships to governments, ranging from 1, indicating active insurgent, to 5, indicating dependence on the government. The modal category is insurgent, comprising almost exactly one-half of group-years. The middle range categories each account for 13–14 percent of group-years, with the smallest category being groups supported by the government, about 7 percent of group-years.

As Table 2 illustrates, ideological opposition to the government does not perfectly correspond to active operations against government forces. Not surprisingly, groups committed to overthrowing the government or seceding are most likely to engage government forces, but even they do not always do so. About 13 percent of the time, the two sides elect not to engage in active hostilities. This sometimes reflects ongoing negotiations, which are typically accompanied by ceasefires. However, the two sides often choose simply not to fight each other. The proportion of active conflict declines as one moves up the scale, as one would expect, bottoming out with category 5 (government-dependent groups) with just eight group-years of active conflict, or 3.2 percent of the total for that category. This is primarily due to government attempts to dissolve dependent groups, which may violently resist. For instance, the Hawngleuk militia led by Naw Kham became the notoriously violent Mekong River pirates after the government of Myanmar tried to disband them because of disagreements related to the group’s smuggling activities (Saw Yan 2012).

The domestic military threat posed by non-state armed groups is thus real, occurring in more than half of the group-years in the data. Groups not in conflict are not necessarily quiescent, however. A large number of groups spend most of their time not engaged in combat with either the government or other groups, but actively preying on civilian populations, with negative consequences for human security.

### Human Security

Non-state armed groups tend to pose more persistent threats to human security than to military security. The data include information on the human rights behavior of each group, which is used here as an indicator of their human security behavior.

Overall, armed groups commit abuses of some kind in more than 75 percent of country-years. Both anti- and pro-government groups pose threats to civilians, although their respective patterns of behavior vary. Figure 1 shows the propensity of each of the five types of armed groups to commit violations of human rights against civilians. Insurgents abstain from human rights violations.

#### Table 2. Active conflict with government by relationship to government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship to government</th>
<th>Active conflict (group-years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insurgent</td>
<td>1,725 (87.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposed</td>
<td>267 (41.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>76 (14.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied</td>
<td>19 (3.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>8 (3.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,095 (55.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* This variable is based on both the group’s self-description and behavior. A group declaring its opposition to the government and actively engaging government forces is coded 1 (insurgent), while one that rhetorically attacks the government or declares its opposition but avoids engaging security forces is coded 2 (opposed to government but avoids active conflict). Category 3 (neutral) groups refrain both from attacking security forces and from declaring their opposition, although they may sometimes be subject to police activities. Allied groups (category 4) have financial and operational independence from the government but generally support it. Many are former insurgents that reached ceasefire arrangements with governments but never disarmed. Category 5 (dependent) groups could not function without government financial support and arms.

*Note:* The specific abuses coded are killing civilians, killing civilian government officials, torture, rape, forced movement, forced membership/conscription, use of child soldiers, forced labor, theft, kidnapping, extortion, property damage, and violations of freedom of movement, civil rights, and religious freedom. Data were also collected on maiming, and violations of women’s rights and of educational rights, but these occurred so rarely in the data that they are omitted here. Because of the high degree of variation in the quantity and quality of the information across groups, as discussed above, the human rights variables are coded as dummies, with 1 indicating a group is reported to have committed that abuse in that year, and 0 indicating it is not.

*Note:* There is a legalistic argument that non-state entities cannot be guilty of human rights violations because they...
abuse in about 16 percent of group years, and commit abuses in 83.7 percent of group years. Groups opposed to the government but avoiding direct conflict with govern- ment forces commit abuses in 70.9 percent of group-years. Neutral groups are in between, committing abuses in 79.8 percent of group-years. This category includes a number of essentially criminal organizations, many of which are kidnapping and/or extortion rackets, and these account for a large proportion of their abuses. Government-affiliated groups are somewhat more disciplined; government-allied groups commit abuses in 50.4 percent of group years, and government-supported groups in 66.8 percent. This is hardly an endorsement, since even the least abusive type of group commits abuses over half the time.

There is a clear pattern to the types of abuses that groups commit. Table 3 compares the mean incidence of human rights abuses reported among government-supported and non-supported groups. As noted above, groups that receive government support are less likely to abuse human rights, but the abuses they are more likely to commit are arguably worse. These include abuses aimed at terrorizing civilian populations, such as killing civilians, torture, rape, forced conscription, impeding freedom of movement, displacing civilians, and violating civil rights (including killing or intimidating candidates for political office and threatening voters). Groups not supported by governments are more likely to engage in financially motivated abuses, including kidnapping, extortion, theft, and forced labor. They are also more likely to engage in property damage (often related to bomb attacks), infringe religious freedom, and kill civilian officials. There is no significant difference between the two types of groups in terms of their propensity to use child soldiers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abuse</th>
<th>Supported by government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom of movement</td>
<td>8.4***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture</td>
<td>10.8***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>8.2***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced movement</td>
<td>4.7**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced membership/conscription</td>
<td>8.9*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill civilians</td>
<td>44.8***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil/political rights</td>
<td>25.0***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child soldiers</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious freedom</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property damage</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kill government officials</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extortion</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced labor</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Units are percent of group years; significance marked on column representing type of group most likely to engage in each abuse, *significant at \( p < .05 \), **significant at \( p < .01 \), ***significant at \( p < .001 \).

A Source of Security?

Some literature suggests that non-state armed groups can also be a source of security to communities,
protecting them from other groups and predatory agents of the state (e.g., Louis 2006; Baker 2007; Reno 2007). Some groups offer services and even quasi-official institutions of governance (Mampilly 2011).

It is difficult to measure the protective role of armed groups directly, because providing security to one community may entail preying on others, making the group appear abusive in the data. One indicator of a protective role might be whether or not the group provides services to civilians. In about 15 percent of group-years, groups administer territory, and in about 23 percent of group-years, groups provide services without controlling territory. Yet, these groups are not less abusive. As Table 4 shows, groups that administer territory are actually more likely to commit human rights abuses than those that do not by about 14 percent. Those that deliver services without controlling territory are even more likely to commit abuses than those that do not deliver services, by 24 percent.

Providing services to followers, either on a territorial basis or not, is most typical of groups with exclusionary strategies. Groups provide services as a means of strengthening bonds with a particular community, attempting to bring in-group civilians together under their banner. Violence against out-groups is the flip side of this strategy, because it creates fear, suspicion, and retaliatory violence against the in-group, hardening identities and forcing in-group members to seek protection from those who initiated the cycle (see, e.g., Frake 1998).

The Islamic State is a good example of this pattern. It embarked on an exclusionary strategy of inflicting mass casualties on Shiite civilians in the mid-2000s when it was known as al Qaeda in Iraq, a campaign so extreme that even the central al Qaeda leadership questioned it. The purpose of such violence is to harden in-group/out-group distinctions, since even Sunnis not sympathetic to IS may face retaliatory violence from Shiites or the government (Kfir 2015). The Islamic State now controls territory and operates public services. An article in its English-language magazine Dabiq shows photographs of bridge repairs, electrification, medical facilities, and street cleaning—saying “a state cannot be established without ensuring that a portion of the sincere soldiers of Allah look after both the religious and worldly affairs of the Muslims” (Islamic State 2014b, 28). However, the operation of these services is also used to mark in-group/out-group boundaries. The “sincere soldiers of Allah” who police theft and resolve disputes also monitor the dress and public behavior of women, persecute minority groups, and extort, kill, and enslave Shias, Yazidis, and other populations regarded as apostate (Caris and Reynolds 2014).

### Table 4. Territorial control, service provision, and abuse (percent of group-years in which abuse is reported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Territorial administration</th>
<th>Services</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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Note: all differences significant at .01 level or better.

### A Comparison of the Non-state Armed Group Data and Uppsala Conflict Data Program

States remain the primary focus of both government security policy and academic data collection on violent conflict such as the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). This is legitimate: states are capable of inflicting far greater damage than non-state actors, using larger, better-equipped forces. The most formidable group in the data is the Khmer Rouge in 1987, with 45,000 fighters and an arsenal including tanks and heavy artillery. This is much smaller than the armed forces of any of the countries examined with the exceptions of Bhutan and Brunei, which rely on India and the United Kingdom, respectively, for their defense needs. State forces are better armed and typically better trained. The potential threats state militaries pose to other states are thus objectively greater than those posed by armed groups.

However, military threats are mitigated by the fact that states in the current era rarely go to war with one another. According to the UCDP conflict data (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson and Wallenstein 2015), in 2014 there were no active armed conflicts between any of the twenty-three states covered in my armed group data. It lists seven of these countries as participating in interstate wars (including internationalized conflicts) in the period 1985–2014, in twenty-six dyad-years.

By contrast, the UCDP data records 437 conflict-years of violence between state and non-state actors, involving thirteen countries and fifty-nine groups in the same period. The non-state armed group data presented here record even more, with fifty groups in active conflict with the governments of twelve of the twenty-three
states in 2014 alone. There are active conflicts between governments and non-state groups in a total of 2,095 group-years in the data between 1985 and 2014. This violence involved twenty-one of the twenty-three countries and 171 groups.

Governments can also be threats to domestic human security. According to UCDP data on one-sided violence, eleven of the twenty-three countries examined committed one-sided violence against civilians, in fifty-six country-years (Eck and Huffman 2007). The UCDP data also include one-sided killings of civilians by forty-four non-state groups in a total of 169 group-years. The non-state armed group data include all these incidents except one, but it records the killing of civilians by a total of 158 groups in 1,645 group-years. UCDP thus includes only about a third of the groups and 10 percent of the incidences of violence in the non-state armed group data.

The large discrepancy is due to the fact that the UCDP data include only groups in conflicts that kill twenty-five or more people. The comparison is not meant as a criticism of the UCDP data, but rather as an observation on the consequences of taking only groups operating in the context of war as the unit of analysis rather than groups more generally.

The UCDP data also focus on the killing of civilians as a metric of human security harms. Human security threats covers much more than killing. More complete data on different kinds of harms help illuminate human security dynamics. This may in turn provide new insights into insurgencies. The prevalence of extortion, for instance, suggests alternative perspectives on armed group financing. Collecting data on armed groups outside conflict can also illuminate the conditions under which groups become more prone to enter into conflict, and their behaviors after conflicts end.

The pattern of activity in the data is the inverse of that imagined in the post-9/11 security paradigm (see Figure 2). Rather than a military security threat, non-state armed groups more often pose a threat to local populations. The military threat they do pose is primarily from domestic insurgency rather than transnational terrorism. The number of group-years of insurgent activity against governments, representing domestic military security concerns, is considerably larger at 53 percent, but larger still is the 75 percent of group-years in which various kinds of depredations on human security occur. The conclusion from this data is that the fear of non-state actors as a military threat is overblown, while the pervasiveness of the threat of non-state armed groups to human security is commonly underrated, in both scholarly and policy discourses.

**Policy Implications and Further Research**

What practical difference does it make if we treat non-state armed groups as a more pervasive threat to human security than to military security? From a human security perspective, the threats non-state armed groups pose are widespread but generally less acute, less amenable to violent solutions, more local, and less global. As such, addressing these problems calls for more tailored, local solutions. These solutions will not necessarily be easier than military approaches to armed groups, but will tend to be smaller and less prone to catastrophic and irreversible unanticipated consequences. Conversely, approaching armed groups...
groups as primarily a military threat is misleading and underplays the insights offered by the concept of human security.

Because non-state armed groups create human security problems through their use of direct violence, they appear akin to military security threats, inviting coercive responses drawn from the military toolkit. But these military security approaches tend to be high risk, because they intrinsically involve the killing of people and destruction of property—actions that are difficult or impossible to reverse or repair. Miscalculations, mistakes, and accidents are irremediable. Furthermore, non-state armed groups can be highly resistant to military interventions because they are extraordinarily adaptive in unsettled environments. Even when military interventions destroy armed groups, they risk exacerbating the very problems they are intended to address. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the most powerful groups in the data, was eliminated by a military campaign, albeit one that was accompanied by extensive human security problems, including the killing of civilians and the destruction of livelihoods. The Pakistani government’s campaigns against the Tehrik-e Taliban have been costly and produced enormous civilian suffering, while arguably strengthening the organization by dividing the population and attracting foreign support (Suba 2010).

Militarized solutions have little utility in addressing threats like extortion, the killing of civilians, kidnapping, the use of child soldiers, or the violation of civil rights (the five most common abuses in the data). Instead, human security brings other solutions into focus, such as empowering aggrieved populations, better policing, discouraging governments from forming and supporting armed groups, disarmament programs, and interdiction of the arms trade. These human security-related actions will not necessarily be easier or lower in cost than military interventions, but they are less likely to incite local resentment, and they may have the added long-term benefit of reducing the probability of mass atrocities that demand militarized solutions. Hence, strategies focusing on human security effects are likely to carry less risk of irremediable unintended consequences.

Negotiations that lead to disarmament and provide aggrieved communities access to political power have produced dramatic changes in the behavior of non-state armed groups. The settlement between Moro insurgents and the government of the Philippines, for instance, produced perhaps the most significant shift in the behavior of an armed group in the data. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) sharply reduced the scope and severity of its abuses after its ceasefire agreement with the Philippine government and its subsequent integration into local government structures. Furthermore, the MNLF assisted the central government in policing and negotiating with its radical splinter groups. This assistance pressured the largest splinter group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), to sign a ceasefire and follow a similar path of integration as the MNLF (Santos and Santos 2010). While negotiations do not uniformly lead to a reduction of human security abuses, they can have a significant effect.

Where groups are less centralized or more criminal in nature, improved policing may be an appropriate policy. Better oversight, more local accountability, higher salaries, improved recruitment, and enhanced training can help ameliorate problems of official corruption in the police forces and improve control over criminalized non-state armed groups. In southern Thailand, improved community policing programs and quasi-official fora for expressing grievances led to a dramatic decline in violence by the Patani United Liberation Organization and its various splinters, for instance. Elimination of these programs by the Thaksin government for partisan political reasons led to an equally dramatic re-escalation of violence and abusive behavior by both rebels and government security forces (National Reconciliation Commission 2006).

Stronger international pressure against governments supporting armed groups could also help reduce the associated human security harms. Government-supported groups are especially prone to terrorizing civilian populations. Removing government support does not guarantee that groups disband, as many simply switch to extortion or drug trafficking to make up for lost revenue. However, the data suggest that, on balance, less government support leads to reductions in human security abuses by armed groups.

Disarmament and arms trade controls could potentially limit the pool of weapons available to armed groups. For instance, the government of New Zealand drafted a treaty, in consultation with the Small Arms Survey, regulating its arms trade to make it more transparent. In 2013, this treaty was adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA 2013; New Zealand and Small Arms Survey 2013). This arms trade treaty will make it easier to determine where the weapons used by non-state groups come from, thus improving interdiction efforts. Although it is unlikely that the flow of arms can be completely eliminated, arms trade controls are important, for they limit the availability of weapons and increase attendant costs. As a consequence, arms trade controls make arming, training, and sustaining armed groups far more difficult.
Of course, policies must be crafted on a case-by-case basis, carefully examining the local dynamics and context of each group. Policy prescriptions must also be applied in a spirit of experimentation. The most important policy, therefore, is to dramatically increase the research both on armed group behavior generally and on specific local contexts. Understanding how different contexts make groups more prone to extort, torture, rape, restrict movement, destroy property, and commit other abuses will be crucial for crafting policies to improve human security. Avoiding unintended consequences and designing effective interventions will require not just a general knowledge of non-state armed group behavior, but also a detailed local knowledge of specific groups and the contexts in which they operate.

Conclusion

If the purpose of security studies is to identify and understand threats, and assist policymakers in developing appropriate and effective policies to deal with those threats, then accurate assessments of non-state armed group behavior are essential. In a world in which conflict between states is rare, such groups present a major source of violence. The questions are: What kind of violence, directed at whom, and how best to address it?

Based on the data above, the most pervasive threat from non-state armed groups is to the human security of local civilians. This has important scholarly implications, as most current studies of civilian victimization (e.g., Downes 2006; Eck and Hultman 2007) or the human rights behaviors of non-state actors (Jo 2015) focus only on cases within war. This reflects a tendency to see traditional military security threats and the state as the primary referents of security, when in fact the majority of non-state armed groups are more threatening to civilians.

These findings also have important policy implications: treating non-state armed groups as military threats tends to lead to militarized responses, which are dangerous and prone to unintended consequences. Crafting alternative policies aimed at mitigating threats to civilian populations requires a better understanding of armed groups and extensive local knowledge. Interventions must be carefully designed. The first step is developing a better understanding of armed groups and the threats they pose.

References


Appendix

The Data

The data are designed to capture the behavior of a wide range of non-state armed groups. These groups share common attributes: they can use organized violence, something normally reserved to the sovereign state, and are not subject to public authorization or accountability. To put some parameters on the scope of the data collection, I crafted selection criteria to capture groups that might reasonably represent an erosion of the state’s monopoly of the use of force.13 As noted in the text, the criteria for inclusion are an armed strength of at least 100 personnel at some point in the group’s history, armed with firearms, persisting at least one year, and with an identifiable leadership structure.

Some parameters had to be put on the data collection to make it feasible, and to ensure some consistency and comparability across cases:

Size

The size cutoff was set at an armed strength of 100 after exploratory work indicated that this was the lowest threshold at which we could reasonably hope to have a fairly complete accounting of groups. There are many smaller groups in operation, but they are so small and local that it seemed unlikely that we would be able to collect information consistently on them.

Arms

There are a number of groups that commit violence but are not armed with firearms. Some are fairly high profile, like the Yakuza in Japan, but these are rare (Adelstein 2013). The firearms criterion was put in place because it did not seem likely that 1) we would ever get a very complete account of these other, unarmed groups, and 2) the threats they posed seemed qualitatively less than those posed by groups armed with firearms.

The armament data are meant to capture not what arms the group might potentially have access to, but rather what arms they actually have and use in operations. There are probably many groups that have access to arms but do not actually seek to obtain them. For instance, due to lenient gun ownership laws, any organization in the United States has access to firearms. However, it makes sense to treat these organizations as an armed group only if they are actually organized as such. Evidence comes from their behavior (e.g., they conducted a certain kind of attack with certain kinds of weapons), from police or military reports of captured weapons, and from eyewitness accounts. Ideally, we have all three kinds of evidence. We do not necessarily have evidence for each year: when we have evidence a group is armed in a particular way in year 1, no evidence for the next year, and then armed in the same way again in year 3, it seems reasonable to infer that they were armed similarly in the second year.

In the case of Yakuza, for instance, there is no evidence of any of the families having an armed strength of 100; that is, 100 members armed with firearms. It is possible that they secretly have large caches of firearms and have trained their people to use them, but there is no evidence, and it seems unlikely given strict Japanese gun laws (Adelstein 2013).

Persistence and Leadership

The requirements that groups persist for at least one year and have an identifiable leadership structure were imposed to separate mobs and riots from armed groups, as these seem to be qualitatively different phenomena.

In addition to the criteria for inclusion, some other considerations are relevant to data collection:

Splinters and Mergers

Splinters and mergers of groups are common. For instance, Myanmar, with the longest-running civil war in the world, has a correspondingly long history of splinters and mergers; India has the notoriously fissiparous Communist Party(s) of India, which has experienced a complex sequence of splinters, alliances, and mergers. In determining how to handle these, researchers look for the operational unit: we try to determine where decision-making is located, and use that to make a judgment about how organizations should be delimited.

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13 The data include groups that might reasonably be considered to pose a threat to the monopoly of the use of force, not groups that states represent as threats. States represent threats for their own reasons, and these reasons may involve political strategies rather than genuine concern. For instance, Chinese claims of threats from Uighur groups are exaggerated but politically useful (Drennan 2015). At the same time, states may also minimize threats, for instance from rebel groups, in order to give the impression of greater control. Independent criteria for what might reasonably represent a threat are precisely what makes the data useful.
For splinters, the rule is that a splinter is added as a separate group if, after it splinters, it continues to meet other project criteria, including lasting over one year, and if it is operationally independent of the original group. Groups that rejoin the original group (which is actually quite common) are treated as separate groups only if they last as a separate organization for at least one year.

When groups merge, the larger group is generally carried forward, counting the smaller group as terminated at the time of the merger. In most cases, the leadership follows suit. There are a few cases in which the merging groups are of approximately equal size. In this case, we look to the leadership: the group whose leader becomes the leader of the merged group is carried forward, while the other group is coded as terminated. As with splinters, mergers are counted only when the merged groups really do seem to operate as a single organization. There are some cases of announced mergers in which the groups continue to operate separately, in which case we continue to treat them as different organizations.

The Location of Attacks
Attacks are coded based on where they occurred, rather than the nationality of the targets. It is not possible to develop an accurate count of attacks on foreign nationals. In cases where the victims are from North America or Europe, identifying such attacks is relatively easy because of the wide press coverage they attract. However, outside that restrictive set of cases, it becomes significantly more difficult. Often the nationality of victims is not reported. Rohingyas in Myanmar and Nepalis in Bhutan may, for instance, consider themselves citizens, while the government does not (see, e.g., Human Rights Watch 2000; Boquérat 2009). Ambiguities also arise with long-term refugee populations in some countries.

The Research Process
Although the group is the unit of analysis, work is organized by country to facilitate the research task. Work on each country begins by using academic, media, and government sources to identify an initial list of prospective groups. As research progresses, additional groups are identified and placed on the list to be investigated in turn. Graduate and undergraduate researchers assisted the author in data collection. The author reviews each group with the researcher to ensure consistency and clarity before keying, and then reviews the keyed data for accuracy before merging it into the data set.

Approximately 2,500 separate sources are cited in the data forms, although many more were consulted in the process of compiling the initial lists of prospective groups and in determining whether groups qualified for the data set. An extremely broad set of sources are consulted, including academic publications, media sources, government documents, non-governmental organization reports, materials generated by the groups themselves, and a variety of research databases including the Global Terrorism Database, the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, Mapping Militant Organizations, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the Peace Research Institute–Oslo, the Human Security Centre, the South Asia Terrorism Portal, and others.