

# State Failure Revisited II: Actors of Violence and Alternative Forms of Governance

*Tobias Debiel/Daniel Lambach*  
(Eds.)

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Institute for Development and Peace  
Institut für Entwicklung und Frieden (INEF)

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## Abstract

**Tobias Debiel/Daniel Lambach (Eds.): State Failure Revisited II: Actors of Violence and Alternative Forms of Governance. Duisburg: Institute for Development and Peace, University of Duisburg-Essen (INEF Report, 89/2007).**

This INEF report is the companion piece to “State Failure Revisited I: Globalization of Security and Neighborhood Effects” (INEF Report 87/2007). While the first working paper mainly took a *structural perspective* and dealt with the global and regional level, the contributions in our new study put those *actors* in the spotlight who shape national and local arenas.

Daniel Biró’s paper on warlordism in the “Westphalian Periphery” reconstructs different waves of warlord analysis (European feudalism; China at the beginning of the 20th century; Africa in the 1990s) and evaluates the usefulness of applying related concepts like praetorianism, organized crime, caudillismo, and insurgency. The article challenges the dominant view that warlords are almost exclusively driven by economic interests and instead looks at warlordism as an alternative form of governance in contexts that are defined by “oligopolies of violence”. Under these circumstances, warlords impact state-building and may even allow for the provision of public goods. Driving factors are the warlord’s need to mobilize a minimum degree of legitimacy within local communities or his aspiration to gain control over society. Furthermore, as Biró argues, warlords may hold the local population captive if humanitarian organizations are willing to deliver social services as they can thus diversify their modes of ‘resource extraction’ and increase their autonomy.

Andreas Mehler and Judy Smith-Höhn present an empirical case study on Liberia and Sierra Leone. Which security-relevant actors are perceived as being able to offer protection? Who is a potential source of threat? Preliminary answers to these guiding questions are given for Liberia, based on data collected in 2006. It turns out that urban respondents regarded the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) as overwhelmingly important for their personal safety, followed by the Liberia National Police (18.4%). Vigilantes, area teams, and neighborhood watches were assessed as ambivalent, being partly a source of protection but also a source of concern. The major threats for personal security, however, obviously stem from street boys, ex-combatants, political party militias, and secret societies. The contribution concludes that international engagement in security sector reform will remain crucial. But it also argues that a clear understanding of all relevant local players, including non-state actors, is necessitated because their relevance will grow as soon as external actors withdraw their personnel and resources.

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## Foreword

At the beginning of 2007, we published "State Failure Revisited I: Globalization of Security and Neighborhood Effects" (INEF Report 87/2007). The respective papers tackled two issues that had been at the margins of the debate before: "Rethinking State Failure: The Political Economy of Security", by Pinar Bilgin and Adam David Morton, argued that the relationship between 'state failure' and globalization had not been adequately theorized. As a consequence, they laid out the contours of an alternative framework to state 'failure' that is attentive to the conditions of uneven development of accumulation patterns and the importation of 'Western' models of sovereign territoriality in non-Western locales. Daniel Lambach in his contribution "Close Encounters in the Third Dimension" conceptualized the regional impact of state failure and undertook a plausibility test with evidence from West Africa.

With "State Failure Revisited II: Actors of Violence and Alternative Forms of Governance", we now present the companion piece. While the first working paper mainly took a *structural perspective* and dealt with the global and regional level, the contributions in our new report put those *actors in the spotlight* who shape national and local arenas. Daniel Biró develops an innovative theoretical understanding of warlordism as an alternative form of governance in the "Westphalian Periphery". The paper grew out of a panel at the 2006 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA) and has been revised and extended substantially since then. It starts with the observation that organized violence after the Cold War is not adequately framed and captured by established theories like Charles Tilly's 'war makes states' thesis or teleological models of state-building. By re-constructing different waves of warlord analysis (European feudalism; China at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; Africa in the 1990s), Biró de-demonizes warlordism and defines warlords soberly as "competing non-ideological military-political actors whose importance is dictated by the capacity (...) to translate their personal command over a significant number of irregular troops into a *de facto*, neopatrimonial control of a region under which the authority of the central state's institutions fails to hold."

In his analysis, Biró includes a broad range of examples but always maintains a particular focus on the 'showcase' of Afghanistan. He discusses in depth in how far warlordism can be explained by leaning towards concepts of praetorianism to research on mafia and bandits and to literature on caudillismo as well as on guerillaism and militiaism. Biró challenges the dominant view that warlords are almost exclusively driven by economic interests. On the contrary, he presents cases – most prominently Ismail Khan's reign in Herat – where public goods were provided by or under the control of warlords. Several factors offer explanations for this, in particular the warlord's need to mobilize a minimum degree of legitimacy within local communities or his aspiration to gain control over society. Biró adds a further interesting interpretation: If international actors, in particular INGOs, are keen to implement hu-

manitarian programmes, warlords as rational actors may try to get their share from the influx of aid money by holding the local population captive. This can be seen as one of several mechanisms used by warlords to diversify their sources of income and their social relations in order to avoid dependency on any single actor. In Biró's analysis, warlordism emerges as an alternative form of governance in contexts that can be defined by "oligopolies of violence" – a concept originally developed with regard to West Africa by Andreas Mehler. Future research might be geared towards investigating the particular conditions under which warlordism in selected case studies hinders or facilitates processes of state-building and the reliable provision of social services.

In the second contribution to this report, Andreas Mehler and Judy Smith-Höhn take stock of security-relevant actors in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Similar to Biró's article, their paper calls into question mainstream models of state-building that ignore empirical realities in war-torn countries. Their argument is based on preliminary results from an innovative research project, primarily funded by the German Foundation for Peace Research, in which they asked citizens and experts who really protects the local population. Data on perceptions were collected by a survey and by in-depth as well as focus-group discussions in urban areas. The 2006 results for Liberia show that respondents regarded the UN Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) as overwhelmingly important for their personal safety, followed by the Liberia National Police (18.4%). Community watch teams such as vigilantes, area teams, and neighborhood watch were perceived as ambivalent, being partly a source of protection but also a source of concern. The major threats for personal security, however, obviously stem from street boys, ex-combatants, political party militias, and secret societies (*Poro, Sandee*).

The contribution has substantial implications for security reform strategies and the question of which actors should be involved in such efforts. The engagement of international actors appears to be crucial, an inclusive approach is required. The urban population at least, however, seems skeptical concerning the integration of traditional institutions such as secret societies into an overall security structure. At the same time, a clear understanding of all relevant local actors and mechanisms for conflict resolution is important. As soon as external actors like the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) withdraw their personnel and resources a gap will become obvious. Weak state authorities and formal institutions will not easily fill this gap, so that private or communitarian actors may become relevant for the provision of security.

As editors we wish you an enjoyable reading of the two papers. We are convinced that they add new perspectives on the issue of state failure from an actor-oriented perspective and will almost certainly stimulate lively debate and future research.

Prof. Dr. Tobias Debiel  
Dr. Daniel Lambach  
Duisburg, Hamburg, August 2007



# The (Un)bearable Lightness of ... Violence

## *Warlordism as an Alternative Form of Governance in the "Westphalian Periphery"?*

Daniel Biró

The reference to Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in an article concerned with forms of organized violence in the contemporary sphere might be surprising. The title I have chosen for this paper\* takes its substance directly from the Czech author's understanding of the duality weight-lightness, in which he expresses the impossibility of adequately capturing the past and, hence, the difficulty of resorting to its models and explanations in light of the present. Similarly, in the context of the point that my paper is making – i.e. that contemporary forms of organized violence cannot be adequately analyzed within the framework of modern state-formation theories – the past can only serve as a starting point to explicate the present. In other words, it is necessary to relinquish the 'weight' of established theories (such as those formulated by Charles Tilly

and others), which maintain a direct connection between war and the formation of modern statehood ('war makes state'). Instead, we should look for a novel analytical framework to discuss the role of organized violence today, which would point to its direct connection with alternative types of polity. Consequently, this article tries to investigate the possibility of conceptually engaging with warlords not as a way of constructing a polity shaped on the image of the modern state with its monopoly of violence on a given territory, but as an alternative form of governance characterized instead by an "oligopoly of violence".

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, the increased intensity of the processes of globalization was accompanied by a resurgence of cases amalgamated under the blurry category of state "weakness", "fragility", "failure" or even "collapse". Almost with no exception, on the ruins of the formal state institutions in the Westphalian Periphery, a ghostly character from the past seemed to be awakened, threatening the international community's efforts towards state (re)construction. Today it is part of conventional wisdom that large parts of territories situated at the periphery of the modern state system are inscribed into a warlord dominion. The widest presumption when writing about warlordism is that it should and would be eliminated as a consequence of one form or another of

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\* In a draft version, this paper was presented at the ISA Annual Convention in San Diego in March 2006. It is written in the context of my PhD research and as such many aspects will be included and further developed in my thesis. I would like to thank Tobias Debiel for his encouragement and feed-back helping me to rework the ISA paper into a publishable piece. My thanks also go to the members of the Department of International Relations at the Australian National University (ANU) who have offered their time, advices and stimulating thoughts, namely to Paul Keal, Greg Fry, André Broome and in particular to Raymond Apthorpe. Cristina Sandru helped me as always in sharpening my thoughts. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings of this essay.





state-building. Depicted in the sensationalist media as the villains of the violent conflicts and the main cause that blocks successful state-building, some of the warlords have enjoyed quite a significant longevity. In this paper I propose to search for the causes of this longevity in their embeddedness in both traditional society and a globalized network, by acknowledging their limited impact on some of the tasks usually associated with the modern state.

Before proceeding to the exploration of the issue, it has to be said that my research restricts its focus to those political units that had limited experience of the “modern state” in terms of a centralized, hierarchically organized monopoly over violence. At the same time, there are corresponding trends in the developed world referring to the erosion of the state’s monopoly over violence – and particularly the phenomenon of “commodification of violence”. While the phenomenon of privatizing security in developed countries led to a burgeoning literature on Private Military Companies (PMCs), the corresponding trends affecting the monopoly of violence in the developing countries are either ignored, obscured or analyzed with a bias in favor of the Weberian image of a modern state. In this sense, my understanding of “Westphalian Periphery” is informed by Michael Atkins’ reference to the expansion of the Westphalian model outside of the European world for whom

“in general terms, such categories [“Westphalian Core” and “Westphalian Periphery”] may be defined by how successfully a state has mustered together both the outwardly visible [Westphalian] institutions as well as the less evident social norms” (Atkins 2003a: 2).

As such, Atkins clearly situates his perspective on the literature studying

the diffusion of the Westphalian institutional model from the “core” to periphery:

“states on the Westphalian Periphery are those whose institutional structures have been imposed from without rather than within, coming relatively late in the history of the state system” (Atkins 2003 b: ii, footnote 1).

Consequently, I will use a narrower understanding of Wallerstein’s core-periphery distinction, to include political units whose recent adherence to the Westphalian system corresponds with differing processes of historical evolution. In this regard, I follow Rolf Schwartz, whose main distinguishing factor between the Westphalian core and its periphery is the internal structure of the political units, including, for instance, “the importance of tribal structures and informal relationships in everyday life and politics” (Schwartz 2004: 4).

In this context, the paper’s underlying message is a plea for the development of a conceptual framework that moves beyond the teleological project of building up a modern state by recognizing the modern warlordism as a sample of adaptative social innovation to conditions of intense economic globalization. To this end, this paper is structured in several parts. In the first section, which is dedicated to a theoretical framework, I argue for the replacement of the state-building perspective with a search for the identification of alternative forms of governance in the absence of a centralized monopoly over violence. Secondly I argue that, given its under-theorized status, a conceptualization of warlords in terms of governance might offer a first step toward the identification of such an alternative. A critical incursion in the definitional maze identifies a serious gap in that it seems to avoid the pro-

vision of some social services in areas under warlord domination. The objective of this critical investigation into the conceptual labyrinth of warlord studies is to advance in the direction of a working definition of warlordery.

The third section will be devoted to the efforts of singularizing the phenomena of warlordery through a compare-and-contrast investigation of other, related non-state armed groups. The simplest way of defining warlords could be to merely see them as "persons whose power derives from the gun" (Woodward 1999), exemplified by the personal command of a private army. As attractive as the simplicity of this approach may be, it is simultaneously too narrow and too large for an operational definition. It is too narrow because, beyond a mere hint as to the origins of the warlords' power, it is not useful when analyzing the dynamics of this power. It is also not helpful in the examination of its interactions with other actors in the territory under its control as well as with the state and the international system. At the same time it is too large a definition, as it allows for the inclusion of all types of actors whose power derives in one way or another "from the gun". It would contain not only the usual category of suspects such as Liberia's Charles Taylor, Afghanistan's Abdul Rashid Dostum, or Ismail Khan, Somalia's Mohammad Aideed, Lebanon's Walid Jumbat or various leaders of the Medellin Cartel, but in effect any leader of an insurgent movement, criminal organization or even an authoritarian/totalitarian state. In the pages that follow a critical investigation of the meaning and the context within which the term "warlord" emerges and is activated, will be offered.

Finally, before concluding this paper, the identification of a governance space within the particular social context of warlordery constitutes the substance of the fourth part that will be used to draw the contours of an alternative form of governance beyond the centralized monopoly over violence. To be sure, mine is not the first attempt to look at the contemporary variety of warlordism in these terms. Most significantly, Stephen Lindberg analyses warlordism in terms of a

"pluralist governance, characterized by open and relatively unregulated competition between social groups and actors for influence over the state ... presumes a multitude of social groups counter-weighting state institutions and acting as checks and balances ... [in which] the state performs only basic functions that take fewer resources and will therefore not have to rely heavily on coercion for extraction of resources" (Lindberg 2001: 186-187).

The novelty of my approach consists in identifying that modicum of public goods available in territories under the control of a warlord, where the latter is a significant actor in a situation that goes beyond the static asymmetry between "strong society" and "weak state" (Migdal 1988). This is not to ignore the fact that the absence of a state's monopoly over organized violence is most of the time destructive, with dire consequences for large parts of the population. Virtually all analyses of warlords and warlord politics stress this aspect to the extent that the phenomenon has been treated in a one-dimensional way, completely disregarding the functions of violence actors for social order. Trying to fill a gap, this paper will mainly address the modicum of social services still provided under a warlord order, without proposing an abandonment of scholarly work focused on the negative impact of the dissipation of the monopoly over





violence. In the context of a “failed” or, for that matter, a “strong” state, organized violence outside the control of the state characterizes contemporary life in a significant number of societies. The necessity of dealing with issues of failed states, dysfunctional institutions and lack of “good governance” at the periphery of the international system has pushed the process of state-building to the core of current scholarly interest, and even more so to the attention of decision-makers. The burgeoning literature on “state failure”, however, is founded on a “negative” logic triggered by the analysis of what is missing in polities at the Westphalian Periphery – cham-

panion of which is the absence of a centralized monopoly over violence.

Building up on this negative logic, the solutions widely offered revolve around the (re)centralization of control over organized violence in a manner reminiscent of the early state-formation theories. In opposition, by not ignoring the provision of social services such as infrastructural networks, health systems and education in areas outside the central government’s control over violence, this research is informed by a “positive” inductive logic centered on identifying what is already in place in those political units.

## 1. State-formation theory and its limitations in the process of state-building

Despite renewed academic efforts to tackle the issue of warlordism, the international community locked into a culture dominated by state fetishism is engaged in a sustained effort to realize an image where

“warlords are disarmed, faction fighters return to their factories, elections are freely and fairly held, and soon after, the troops return home” (MacKinlay 2000: 78).

### 1.1 Deep-seated convictions and new understandings of statehood

Continuous debates on the transformation of warlords into state politicians (“from warlords to peacelords” framework) reflect a deep-seated conviction in the possibility of reproducing the strategies of the early state-formation. Borrowing from the debate surrounding the issue of state-building as different from its predecessor process of state-formation, I argue that the most appropriate

method of analysis should be informed by a dynamic vision of statehood as an entity which is constantly being constructed and reconstructed as regards the structure of its organization, goals, functions, instruments and methods of governance. As such, the research needs to be conversant with recent literature that introduces variation in both the forms and functions of the state<sup>1</sup>.

Accordingly, it is useful to distinguish between the early formation of the (European) modern state and the

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1 Concerning the variation in state forms, see the Cooper-Sørensen-Tanaka typology of pre-modern, modern and post-modern worlds, or Bobbitt’s typology including “princely”, “kingly”, “territorial”, “state-nation”, “nation-state” and “market-state” (Cooper 2000; Tanaka 2002; Sørensen 2001b and Bobbitt 2002). I am using the idea of variation in the functions of the state in a manner similar to Barry Buzan’s “alteration of the idea of state” (Buzan 1991). See also Mattei Dogan’s formulation on the paternalist or security-oriented vs. maternalist or welfare state (Dogan/Pellassy 1987).

fate of peripheral polities in the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The appearance of the modern state on the ruins of the late European Middle Age as a result of violent collisions between various actors is usually described in terms of *state-formation*, implying an unintentional character of a centuries-old process<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, the allegedly corresponding processes of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are approached from the perspective of *state-building*, referring to the intentional character of designing the desired form of polity around the features of the modern state. Distinguishing between state-formation and state-building suggests dissimilarities in the effects of institutional construction between early and late efforts. The idea of lateness as an analytical device represents a translation of the political economist Alexander Gershenkron's idea of late-industrialization for which the logic of latecomers revolves around the ideas of institutional innovation and "catching-up" through "burning stages of development" (Gershenkron 1962)<sup>3</sup>. I regard Gershenkron's model of early vs. late industrialization as essential to correct the rather unilinear and teleological assumption of institutional development, thus allowing for qualitative variations in the forms and functions of the state.

2 This is the usage favored by classic authors such as Norbert Elias in his work on the creation of a public monopoly over violence, Charles Tilly's thesis that "war makes state", or Hendrik Spruyt's work on the comparative advantage of the new institutional type – the modern state (Elias 1994; Tilly 1975, 1990; Spruyt 1994).

3 In the field of historical sociology, it is Thomas Ertman who uses the Gershenkronian framework to refine Tilly's account of the state-building process (Ertman 1997). This use of Gershenkron in the context of state-formation appears on the literature on Middle East in Lustick 1997.

Consequentially, lateness is prone to produce variation in outcomes, in both the forms and functions of the institutions of governance, thus supplementing a hidden "logic of homogeneity" of state-building with a "logic of heterogeneity" (Sørensen 2001a: 25-32).

There is an interesting shift in the late creation of state institutions. While the first modern states were created through political innovations in *domestic* extractive and administrative techniques imposed under pressure from *external* competition, contemporary leaders, be they state representatives, warlords or other entrepreneurs of violence, create various forms of political organization through a reversed process. In this, they benefit from *external* extraction of military, financial and legitimacy resources, while confronted with predominantly *internal* security threats. On the issue of state-building, Miguel Angel Centeno (1997) challenged the causal mechanism modeled on the European extraction-coercion cycle (Tilly, 1975; 1990) in a comparative study of 11 Latin American political units during the period of state-formation in the "short 19th century". As a result, he refines the theoretical model by introducing three intermediate variables to connect war with state-making and the transformation of organized violence into "productive" violence: the internal source of revenue, the timing of warfare as related to efficient pre-existent institutions, and the existence of social actors to support state centralization as a consequence of war (Centeno 1997: 1569). The context for warlordism is built in total opposition: with very rare exceptions, warlords benefit from externally extracted revenues, while the existent, traditional institu-







tions continue to be strongly resistant to the creation of a centralized bureaucracy that would favor the rise of the modern state.

Recent years witnessed remarkable achievements by authors trying to advance substantial explanations of why violence in the “Westphalian Periphery” is far from creating modern institutions of monopoly over violence. As a result, we now know that it is not only the alteration in the nature of threat or the *sources of revenues* that modifies the relationship between warfare and state-creation, but also the radical transformation of the *nature of warfare* itself. Thus, the state-creating wars are said to be those that had an external orientation and a territorial nature. Conversely, the state-destroying wars take place within a given territoriality and are internally-oriented in an environment characterized by the spread of cheap small arms, machetes, etc (Sørensen 2001b: 345- 347). Despite these progresses, the literature is incomplete, as it stops short of investigating what forms of governance result from contemporary contexts of violence. The logical extension of investigating the factors that might hinder the monopolization of violence is to analyse the sustainability of a form of governance in the context of a state that does not monopolize organized violence on its territory. The context of warlordism provides exactly such an opportunity. But in studying warlordism, it is necessary to inscribe into the analysis a shift away from the study of “state” to an examination of “power” and its micro-politics, and refocus attention on the concept of “governance”. The aim to establish the “polity” as the fundamental unit of study in International Relations (Walby 2003; Lemke 2005).

The acceptance of “governance without government” (Czempiel and Rosenau 1992) derives from the rich literature on international regimes further supported by the emergence of private authority in the international system (Hall and Biersteker 2002). Conceptually, this triggers a separation between the *institution of government* and the *functions of governance*. Thus,

*“government* refers to formal institutions that enjoy national sovereignty, possess a monopoly of power over a particular territory and are not answerable to an external authority” while *“governance* is a social function such as the regulation of economic affairs” (Wolfgang Reinicke quoted in Gilpin 2002: 240).

Similarly, Kooiman draws the important conclusion that while the process of governing refers to a

*“goal-directed [public] intervention ... governance is the result – or the total effect of social-political-administrative interventions and interactions, across public and private, beyond markets and hierarchies”* (my italics, Kooiman quoted in Rhodes, 1996: 657)

As such, the classic public-private distinction becomes blurred not only in the economic, political and social area, but also in the military one, as illustrated in a form of ‘labor-division’ among central institutions, local warlords and domestic or international NGOs.

## 1.2 Why warlordism as an alternative form of governance?

Firstly, the major reason for the focus on warlords has to do with the rapid expansion in the Westphalian Periphery of a phenomenon associated with “warlord politics” (Reno 1998). An illustrative instance of this is provided by the growing interest in various aspects of warlordism on the part not only of the mass media, but



also of academic literature. Originally used to describe the characteristics of governance in pre-Communist China, the concept of warlordism today designates features of (non-) governance in places such as Liberia, Somalia, the Lebanon or Afghanistan,

“where the structure, authority and power of the central government had either decayed or fragmented altogether” (Peake 2003: 182).

The phenomenon of non-state armed actors contesting the central government’s attempts to monopolize the control over violence is therefore far from being new: it extracts its conceptual substance from feudal Europe through its Chinese version at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the contemporary forms it takes in diverse polities. Nor is it geographically or culturally circumscribed: descriptions of warlordism in one form or another cover a wide geographical area from China in the early 1920s to contemporary Europe (Serbia), to cases in Central Asia (Afghanistan or the former Soviet Union republics), Africa (Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia) or South America (Colombia)<sup>4</sup>. Despite this multi-dimensional variety, the word “warlord” has not become any less emotionally charged in its usage, nor has it abandoned its initial pejorative significance, since it continues to signify “purely a phenomenon of disintegration” (Ottaway 2000: 263).

Secondly, the interest in warlordism fits well into the general change of direction in I.R. theory toward a concerted effort to deal with units other than the state, be they at the

supra- or a sub-state level. The state – classically defined by Weber as the political unit which successfully claims monopoly over legitimate violence and exclusive authority within territorial boundaries – remains the bedrock of the Westphalian international system. At the same time, its privileged position in the analysis of international politics has faded in favor of non-state actors. These non-exclusive, private or public substitute forms of authority cover a large spectrum, from

“institutions of global governance to the trans-national third sector, from religious movements to criminal organizations” (Mason 2005: 38).

In this sense, it is hard to avoid the temptation of analyzing present forms of warlordism in the context of the literature on “neo-medievalism”, defined as

“a system of overlapping authority and multiple loyalties, held together by a duality of competing universalistic claims” (Friedrichs 2001: 482).

Thirdly, a fresh take on the phenomenon of warlordism as a form of governance on its own – against views that regard it as simply a transitional phase or, worse, as an anachronistic projection of an antiquated form of governance in modernity – might shed a new light on issues such as peace-making and state-building or governance promotion in “collapsed” states. I am therefore in agreement with Dietl when I consider that (1) warlordism is neither *passé* nor a simple aberration; that (2) it is far from being a uni-dimensional, homogenous and uniform phenomenon; and, most importantly, that (3)

“as the theory of International Relations seeks to come to grips with non-state actors, the phenomenon of warlord deserves a more serious and systematic inquiry” (Dietl 2004: 64).

<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that the latter is a homogeneous phenomenon characterized by the same constitutive elements or leading to the same dynamics. Warlordism is in fact embedded in the local social, economic, political, cultural or military framework, and this embeddedness certainly impacts on its forms of manifestation.



## 2. Warlord – inside the maze of a fundamentally contested definition

### 2.1 Three waves of warlord analysis

Without intending to comprehensively organize an archeology of the concept, it is sufficient to say that in the last century, there have been three major waves in the way in which the concept was used by various scholars writing in and about different circumstances. All three waves were strictly circumscribed to a well-defined geographical area: the European feudal realm of warlordism in the first wave; the Chinese civil war at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for the second wave; and most recent, the disintegration of formal states in post-colonial Africa during the 1980s. As made known by Waldron in a series of articles (1990, 1991), the modern concept "warlord" was coined in the Chinese context following the disintegration of the Qing Empire in 1911. From this context, the term "warlord" seems doomed to carry with it continuously the imprint of militarism rising from the ashes of a certain centralized political structure in a transitory manner. Reflecting on his study of the Chinese experience of warlordism in the 1920s, Lucien Pye maintains the military element at the core of his definition:

"the basis of warlord politics was the institution of personal armies at the disposal of individual military commanders" (Pye 1971: 39).

Yet, as noted by Kiril Nourzhanov, he moves towards a functionalist definition in showing that the main warlords

"were *sovereign* over their organisations and in their domains, and there were no formal or

legal authorities that could regulate or control their actions" (Nourzhanov 2005: 110).

Pye's contribution is significant because, in highlighting the missing link in the literature on warlordism, it leaves its mark on the study of this phenomenon for the next generation of scholars: while the element of sovereignty could have opened an avenue for active research in the social domain of warlordism, at the same time the focus of the research remains the military domain. Pye was aware that,

"although their reputation and success or failure in the political field was contingent upon the strength of their armies, these *tuchuns* [warlords] found it necessary to compete with others like commanders in obtaining political and economic rewards" (Pye 1971: 42).

Substantial parts of his study examine the organizational dynamics of the warlords as a military institution, as well as the nature of their competition in the context of the Chinese state's disintegration and loss of control over the military. However, with very few exceptions, the attention paid to the nature of sovereign governance on the territories or over the population under the warlords' control is sparse and lacks consistency.

The study of warlordism was instilled with new breath when the analysis of African post-colonial decay of the state led some authors to investigate the analytical benefits of using the old concept to understand the new realities<sup>5</sup>. In analyzing cases

5 The widely quoted works of the Africanists using the concept of warlords appeared in the 1989 special issue on "Warlords and the Problems of Democracy" of the *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 16, Issue 45/46.





like Chad, the concept was resurrected in the late 1980s by scholars of Africa who closely followed the classical depiction of the Chinese 1920s portrayal of the warlords occupying the vacuum behind the collapse of central institutions as

“mindless [that is “irrational”] barbarians bent on dragging the population which lived in the areas they controlled back to a dark age of tribalism” (MacKinlay 2000: 77).

Finally, the 1990s with its economic focus and the debate on globalization brought a new context for the study of non-state armed groups and in particular for the analysis of the warlord. By the late 1990s, a qualitative change in the analysis of warlords took place diverting the attention to the (transnational) economic dynamics that facilitate their thriving. Within the economy of war literature we can differentiate between the *greed vs. grievance* stream (e.g. Berdal and Malone 2000; Collier/Hoeffler 2001) and a stream that focuses on the effects of globalization and the networking nature of war (Reno 1998; Duffield 1998). Moving beyond the simplistic assumptions of irrationality characterizing the previous waves, the literature on the “economy of war” focuses on the motives and rational strategies employed by warlords to promote their personal interests, in due process unveiling the “modern warlord” as an integral part of a contemporary globalized international economy. In the literature of this wave, the favorite definition remains Mark Duffield’s portrayal of the warlord as

“a leader of an armed band, possibly numbering up to several thousand fighters, who can hold territory locally and at the same time act financially and politically in the international system without interference from the state in which he is based” (Duffield 1998: 18 quoted in MacKinlay 2000: 71 as well as Jackson 2003: 132).

The economic perspective, with its focus on the motives and alternative strategies of resource extraction used by warlords, is helpful in moving the analysis beyond the reduction of warlords to the status of irrational figures acting in a chaotic manner characterized by gratuitous violence, anarchy and disorder. The insertion of this particular form of rationality is not, however, the only notable contribution of the “economies of war” perspective on the scholarly study of warlordism. Warlords are no longer depicted as a relic of an uncivilized past; they become, instead, an intrinsic part of modernity (or even post-modernity) by (a) the emphasis placed on the commercial motivations beyond the control of the state institution that forge a connection with international markets; and (b) the deterritorialization that follows the replacement of the bureaucratic rule over a specified territory with control through “selective access to rights to profit from commercial enterprises” (Reno 1998: 98).

William Reno, one of the prominent advocates of this paradigm, follows the commercial interests of the warlords as the critical variable in the analysis of conflicts that ravaged parts of the Westphalian Periphery, only to emphasize the radical political innovation of warlords: market control in the absence of centralized institutions, through external extraction of resources and strengthened alliances with outsiders. Thus, warlord politics

“marks places ... where political power is pursued almost exclusively through control over markets and accumulation of wealth, and [where] state institutions play little, if any, role in regulating political competition” (Reno 1998: 8).

The key dimension on which these waves intersect is the absence of a monopoly over violence by a decay-



ing state. We have seen by now how the phenomenon of warlordism was approached in the last century. But what were the explanations offered for its appearance? In a refined summary of the literature on the genesis of warlordism, within the general framework of a weakening and ultimately disintegrating state, Giustozzi identifies several avenues. Firstly, in what he calls “orphan warlordism” modeled on the Chinese case, the “political power collapses, but the military forces on which it rested survive, at least in part”, filling up the resulting vacuum. Secondly, in a variation of this “fragmented praetorianism”, far from adopting a reactive position by waiting for the central state power to collapse, the would-be warlords actively make their claim for absolute power at the regional level. Alternatively, warlordism could be analyzed in terms of disintegration not only of state structures but also the fragmentation of societies and the break-up of previous armed movements who contested the regime and attempted to capture the state:

“warlordism might be an indirect outcome, as when non-state political organisations, such as armed movements, experience a weakening of the hold of the central leadership over its field commanders, who might then develop into warlords” (Giustozzi 2005: 15).

A further insight in the debate concerning the rise of warlordism was provided by the analyses of the Chinese experience. Arthur Waldron examined a series of articles from the 1920s, especially those of Hu Shi, in which he identifies the origin of warlordism as a reaction to various attempts of political centralization by military means:

“warlordism had originated when, instead of understanding that the action of strong local institution would eventually create an enduring union, leaders attempted once again to

use force to create unity” (in Waldron 1990: 123).

In numerous cases in today’s world, similar efforts of centralization through the use of force can be at least partially associated with a reactive rise of armed contestations of the state’s monopoly over organized violence. In Colombia for instance, the central authorities’ attempt to institutionalize the so-called “war on drugs” had the unintended consequence of destabilizing the state-society relations due to the

“virulent reaction by narco-traffickers, who started a terrorist campaign in the 1980s against both state and society ... [that ultimately] destabilized the relation of the paramilitary with the state” (Sanin/Baron 2005: 5).

In Sierra Leone, the warlords’ road to power was marked by the attempt of the formal state leaders in the early 1980s to seek a “centralization of power through the mobilization of armed gangs” which in turn had the effect of strengthening the position of would-be warlords through a militarization of a local conflict (Reno 2003: 82).

Similarly, the rise of modern warlordism in Afghanistan can be analyzed in terms of the warlords’ legitimation through their resistance in the face of ideologically-driven military efforts of state-centralization, either in its Soviet phase (1978-1989) or in its subsequent Islamic one under the Taliban (Roy 2004).

## 2.2 What defines an (in)famous actor on the market of violence?

Partially due to the pejorative connotation associated with the word, “warlord” is essentially a disputed concept, on whose definition there is no substantial consensus among the academic community. At one extreme of

the spectrum, John MacKinlay is an eloquent voice among those who refer to warlords exclusively as a negative phenomenon:

“Although his power rested on the possession of military forces, like the baron and the chieftain, the warlord *occupied territory in a strictly predatory manner and his social activities seldom enriched the lives of the civilian families in his grasp*” (MacKinlay 2000: 71).

If that is true, it makes the reference to an idealized feudal “lordship” rather misleading. Alternatively, there are voices that, without ignoring the dire consequences deriving from a power built up on the barrel of the gun, strive to underscore the opportunities opened up by warlordism as it emerges under conditions of and reinforcing a “modified social structure” (Stuvoy 2002: 16). Among those isolated voices, Lucien Pye is probably one of the most prominent, stressing the potential for opening up the public space for a pluralist system, characterized by competition among various centers of political power (Pye 1971). Despite the definitional maze that continues to plague scholarly warlord studies, there seems to be a minimal consensus on the context of its development and some of its main characteristics. Thus, the starting point of this analysis is constituted by two of the most widely-used definitions, out of which I will extract the constitutive elements as well as the propitious circumstances governing the emergence of warlordism.

The closest to a definitional minimal and non-pejorative common denominator that we have in the current warlord studies seems to be the definition already quoted which is associated with Mark Duffield (1998: 18). If Duffield’s definition situates the warlord in the contemporary globalized international system as well as within a state-system, the other robust image

is inspired by a military figure dwelling on the ruins of the Roman Empire. In what Giustozzi refers to as “the most advanced theorisation of ... [non-modern] warlordism”, one scholar describes

“a process in which officers on active service were becoming increasingly powerful locally, through their attachment to the land in regions in which they served, while state control over the exercise of private patronage was becoming weaker” (Dick Whittacker quoted in Giustozzi 2005: 1).

From those two approaches one can derive an image of the warlord sharing the following characteristics. First of all, as an actor whose power resides in the gun, he is a *leader of a military organization*, which can be either of an ad-hoc or more permanent nature, even if Duffield’s reference to an “armed band” is a clear hint that his troops do not necessarily have a sound military training. Indeed, the “rank and file” of a warlord’s organization is generally constituted by irregular forces, with or without much fighting experience, regardless of the origins of the leadership: the “former officers on active service” from Whittacker’s narrative are associated in the Chinese context with the elite of the former Imperial army. The circumstances differ from case to case in what concerns the military training. In Africa, as Herbst notes, the rebel forces, including those under the command of various warlords, are uncommonly stronger than several hundreds, while their “foot soldiers” rarely have much fighting experience (Herbst 2004). In contrast, the prolonged nature of the conflict in Afghanistan built up a remarkable pool of battle-hardened fighters. This situation is replicated in other contemporary cases even if generally at a lower level of command in the military structures of the weak host state. Thus, a second characteristic is that





the men under the warlord's command do represent a *locally significant force*, as they number up to the level of thousands.

Thirdly, the command of this significant contingent of irregular force offers the warlord a high degree of *local or regional autonomy*. There is indeed a widely shared consensus in regard to the warlord's autonomy, even if there might be differences between various scholars as to the extent of this autonomy. It has already been shown how Lucien Pye famously described the Chinese warlords as "sovereign over their organisations and in their domains" (Pye 1971: 39). The context in which Pye uses the concept of sovereignty indicates the capacity of autonomous control over the decisions of an organization rather than the formal international recognition that refers to the state system. In this regard, the modern warlords can be said to have the same degree of autonomy in dealing with the military decisions of the groupings under their command. And yet, their capacity to expand that autonomy to decisions outside the military sphere depends, if my perspective is correct, on their capacity to manoeuvre between various internal and external actors, including international agencies, other states and their own weakened state.

A more radical view is represented by recent efforts toward the conceptualization of warlords as "sovereign non-state actors" (Vinci 2006). Building on the premises that the warlord's relationship with the state can be conceived as one "*empirically* sovereign actor to another", Vinci is forced to describe the warlord organization as "a praetorian political community ... autonomous and independent from other political communities." (Vinci

2006: 2). It is obvious that the intention here is to reverse the situation described by Jackson and Rosberg (1982) for quasi-states being defined as those units that enjoy a *de jure*, legal sovereignty in the external realm of the international society of states, while lacking a *de facto*, "empirical" domestic sovereignty. On the contrary, the warlord as a "sovereign non-state actor" possesses a so-called empirical sovereignty (whose universe of application is reduced not to a territorial base, but to its organization), but suffers the lack of external recognition of a legal sovereignty<sup>6</sup>.

While appearing in opposition to the central state's attempt to monopolize the means of violence, warlords are far from acting in conditions defined by a stateless society, as has persuasively been argued recently by Schetter et al. (2006). They oppose vigorously a manicheistic/dichotomic understanding of state and warlordism, stressing that

"the relationship between warlords and the state can be described as a situation or process in which the former reduce state order and power due to the take-over of state positions, while simultaneously ignoring the fulfilling of state functions and the obeying of state rules" (Schetter et al. 2006: 3).

Warlords thus emerge within the boundaries of a formal state, albeit bureaucratically weakened, in an environment characterized by

"a devolution of power from the centre to the local level as state agents of coercion (army

<sup>6</sup> While I share the views on warlord's autonomy, I have doubts on the sovereign dimension attached to his relation to other entities, including its own or other states. As shown below, I consider Vinci's use of praetorianism at best as ambiguous. To his credit, he is aware that the warlord organization is "not a true praetorian political community" but derives this conclusion solely from the fact that sometimes the organization is commanded by the collective structure of the clans (Vinci 2006: 12).

and police) cease to function" (Jackson 2003: 133).

For instance, in both avenues for the emergence of warlords examined by Giustozzi, the emphasis is on their regional nature: either in the case of a so-called "orphan warlordism", resulting from the collapse of the political power at the center but the survival of the military structures in a regionalized (or more precisely, localized) manner; or the disintegration of a centralized control of non-state political organizations over their localized armed groups (Giustozzi 2005: 15). Thus, warlordism can be described as a form of militarized, regionally fragmented authority, in which the state's weakened authority does not extend much further from the geographical center of the national territory – mainly the capital<sup>7</sup>.

If cases as diverse as China following the collapse of the imperial order, Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion in 1979 or Somalia after the collapse of the Barre regime are all paradigmatic cases of warlordism, then it is worth mentioning that the regional dominance of a warlord is accompanied not only by the existence of a weak center, but also by the existence of other regionally-dominant warlords. As such, warlordism is in fact a polycentric or acephalous politico-military system, whose international boundaries are exter-

nally decided. Thus, the plurality of localized armed contestation of the center's monopoly over violence should be emphasized rather than concentrating on a unique actor. Warlords in a polycentric system rather than a single warlord give warlordism the measure of its nature.

Furthermore, in opposition to the Weberian ideal type of the modern, rational-legal or bureaucratic authority, warlordism is consensually described as a form of *person-centered politics*, a variety of the "great man theory" (Oberson 2002: 95-99). Thus, in the particular circumstances of the disintegration of central authority, warlords flourish in "segmented societies", with political systems based on various solidarity groups, characterized by a strong emphasis on clan or tribal allegiances (Oberson 2002: 98) or religious affiliations. Under these conditions, the analysts refer to the replacement of formal, hierarchical and impersonal structures with personalized structures. The highly personalized nature of politics and the weakness and marginalization of institutional constraints are placed into what Morten Boas, referring to African states, calls "neo-traditional" clientelistic (neo-patrimonial) relations, [defined as] the simultaneous activation of both patrimonial and bureaucratic logics; on the one hand there is a

"system of patron-client ties that bind leaders and followers in relationships of assistance and support that are built on recognized and accepted inequality between 'big men' and 'smaller men'" (Boas 2001: 670).

On the other hand, though, as a result of its adaptive capacity for interaction with formal political structures,

"another important dimension is the exchange relationships between equals, between 'big men' in various positions who exchange resources with one another" (Boas 2001: 670).

7 The regional focus of warlords is clearly apparent in the Chinese case (see Diana Lary's 1980 article for an excellent overview). The same can be said with regard to the current situation in Afghanistan's Northern provinces, controlled by Dostum, or the Western provinces under the control of Ismail Khan until 2004. A similar story is narrated analyzing the regional control of Aideed in the areas surrounding Mogadishu in Somalia or the Taylorland, wrapping parts of Liberia and Sierra Leone under the military control of Charles Taylor.







More than anything, warlords appear in situations in which the neopatrimonial rule functions under the specter of the gun to an extent that,

*“warfare in effect becomes politics and politics warfare in a permanently militarized anarchical society where the authority of an effective central state no longer prevails”* (Rich 1999: 6)<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, no analysis of warlordism would be complete without reference to the ideological and economic dimensions. Indeed, in both the domestic and the international arena, warlords are described as *non-ideological actors*, which differentiate them from other forms of non-state armed groups contesting the state or in fact the regime’s supremacy. Referring to this non-ideological nature of contemporary warlordism, Paul Rich, for instance, links it with its emergence in the post-war phase of anti-colonial insurgency, reflecting

*“the decline of ideological appeals to ‘national liberation’ in the Third World politics since the early 1980s, and the fracturing of a number of post-colonial ‘quasi-states’”* (Rich 1999: 7).

In a similar manner, Giustozzi shows how

*“the term ‘warlord’ has been in vogue since the late 1980s among Africanists, who used it to indicate regional military rulers or armed politicians who did not display much political ideology nor reformist aims”* (Giustozzi 2005: 5).

Noting the absence of an ideological element in warlordism as a phenomenon, referring to politics as *“the process of gaining or maintaining support for common actions”*, Giustozzi rightfully hurries to add that warlordism does *“require a political attitude, even when ideology is not involved at all”*

<sup>8</sup> The problem with Rich’s politico-military image of the warlord is that it completely ignores the social dimension, which should be supplemented by encapsulating the warlord in a neo-patrimonial system.

(Giustozzi 2005: 5). At the same time, the placement of warlordism along ethnic, tribal (clan) or religious fracture lines in a segmented society continues to reflect its political mantle, even when the ideological icing is obscured.

More often than not, in accordance with various forms of the economy of war thesis, ideology is rather replaced with the pursuit of naked economic interests and thus comfortably conciliated with the constant reference to the prominence of economic dimension and the predatory nature of the warlords. The image of the contemporary warlord as driven in its criminal enterprises exclusively by the pursuit of personal, material profit not only derives from the *“greed”* side of the *“economies of war”* perspective (Reno 1998), but also marks the *“market of violence”* paradigm (Elwert 1999). With warlordism thriving in a context of disintegration of central state institutions coupled with extreme poverty and the existence of untapped natural resources, various studies have concluded in one way or another that

*“the self-stabilised structure of warlord conflicts owes its continuation mainly to a profit-oriented economic system which combines violence and trade as a means of access to commodities”* (Elwert, quoted in Oberson 2002: 78).

It is at this junction of ideological fluidity and economic embeddedness that the issue of contemporary globalization acquires its significant role in providing the framework for analyzing not only the alteration between the ideological and the economic motivation, but also the interactions with the international system and the prominent role of external actors (be they states, international organizations or non-governmental ones) in the rise and evolution of the warlords. Even if the mechanisms, intensity and

the consequence of intervention differ in the Chinese case and the current situation at the Westphalian periphery, it is safe to say that in both cases there was/is a significant presence of external actors. The Chinese warlords, according to their location and political inclination, were sponsored either by Japan or by the Soviet Union, even if only on a reduced scale<sup>9</sup>. Yet Chinese warlordism depended mostly on the domestic extraction of resources or the private commercial enterprises. In contemporary cases, there is an extensive literature on the more prominent role of external actors on Afghanistan's wars, as well as on the regionalized or internationalized economy of war for the African states.

Summing up, from the fusion of various aspects discussed above results a generalized image of warlords that will inform the second part of the essay. As such, warlords are provisionally defined as those:

competing non-ideological military-political actors whose importance is dictated by the

capacity – enhanced by the sponsorship of external actors – to translate their personal command over a significant number of irregular troops into a *de facto*, neopatrimonial control of a region under which the authority of the central state's institutions fails to hold.

The advantage of such a definition is that it contains most elements against which the identity of a specific armed group can be judged. On the other hand, it is broad enough to allow a sufficient degree of variance inside a category whose real life protagonists indeed display a high level of heterogeneity. Within this definition, it is possible for instance to have the role of economic interest emphasized more than the embeddedness in traditional forms of authority hinted at by the neo-patrimonial nature. Indeed, it seems that the Liberian case reflects more the predatory, economic nature of warlordism, while some cases within Afghanistan mirror the phenomenon of warlordism as rooted or linked to the strength of the traditional social structure.



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<sup>9</sup> See Lary 1980: 466; McCord 1993; Giustozzi 2005: 3.



### 3. Warlords and other non-state armed groups: analytical vicinities of a contested concept

A meaningful analytical use of a concept such as “warlord” requires a clarification of the main attributes by opposing and distinguishing the concept from other forms of militarized groups or organizations contesting the central state monopoly over violence on a given (national) territory. In engaging in this rather daring process, two caveats should be exposed. First of all, while building upon existing literature dealing with the issue of regular or irregular militarized challenges to the state monopoly over violence, this section is not an attempt to compile a taxonomy of various forms, compositions, and strategies employed by non-state armed groups<sup>10</sup>. The (more limited) purpose of this paper is to focus on placing and individualizing the amorphous phenomena of warlordism inside a larger category. In engaging with this contested maze of concepts and differentiations, a second caveat reflects the variety of Tolstoy’s unhappy family: while it is assumed that the modern state’s military organization is based more or less on similar principles, aims, and structures, the “unhappiness” of militarized non-state groups is reflected not only in the variety of several categories spanning a large area from bandits and Mafioso to insurgencies but in an immense variety within each category itself. The same can be said

about warlordery, which, far from being a homogenous phenomenon on either the temporal or the spatial scale, shares several characteristics of some armed groups while differing from others. Yet it is believed that for analytical purposes some broad generalizations on the characteristics of all those armed groups are not only justified but could be useful if we guard against the danger of ossification for those categories.

The re-emergence of both scholarly and sensationalist media interest in warlordism a decade after the end of the Cold War can be placed in the general category of attempts to understand phenomena emerging out of a period of profound societal and systemic transformation and its accompanying inherent turbulence. In fact, the category of warlord was always presented in a context of profound and costly socio-economic and politico-military transformations. This is true of all three waves of warlord studies: the literature on the late medieval European “lords of war” corresponds to the transformation of a feudal system into a modern, capitalist one; similarly, the Chinese warlords of the first decades of the twentieth century emerged and are consequently analyzed in the context of the breakdown of the imperial traditional system and its replacement with the Republican one; finally, the background of the “Africanist” wave of warlord studies is constituted by the “failure” or even “collapse” of some weak post-colonial African states. The constant appearance of a phenomenon codified as “warlordism” determined one of its scholars to note that

<sup>10</sup> There are not very many systematic attempts at building up a typology of various non-state armed groupings. Among recent ones, the present essay will draw on the more general taxonomy of Richard Schultz (Schultz et al 2004; Schultz 2005) as well as on the typology of insurgencies exposed by Christopher Clapham (1996; 1998).



“warlords have been present for centuries and have periodically emerged whenever centralized political-military control has broken down” (Jackson 2003: 131).

The uniting thread of all these various strands of warlord literature is the reference to the armed (military) “challenges to center’s right to exclusive ownership and use of coercive power” (Dietl 2004: 41). It is exactly the armed nature of this organized contestation of the state’s monopoly over the use of violence that inscribes the warlord structure into a vast category of armed groups with which, more often than not, it is confused. From the universe of armed rebels that oppose the centralized state’s monopoly over violence, analyses of the warlord are mostly prone to be accompanied by reference to various incarnations of praetorianism as a militarization of political life, or to the combative actions of groups such as bandits, caudillo, mafia organizations, guerilla, or other types of insurgencies.

In the following pages, the purpose is to differentiate between the uses of exactly those categories. It’s useful to keep in mind that warlordism, while sharing many features across time as well as geographical areas, remains a product of local circumstances which in turn model the forms shared characteristics take and condition their consequences. By the same token, warlordery can be described as a hybrid form of localized armed contestation of state’s monopoly over violence. In exploring the nature of warlordery, the favored approach is to situate the chosen form of armed organizations on the following axes of analysis: origin/location if not *loci* of operations (rural vs. urban or rather local/peripheral vs. central), size, nature of operation (temporary/*ad-hoc* vs. permanent), relations

with other state actors (autonomy, cooperation, dependency), nature of objectives (political vs. economic), the existence and role of ideology in fomenting support and guiding action, as well as the role of external intervention.

None of these categories is uncontested. For instance, a disputed dichotomy, the rural-urban opposition, might be dismissed as too superficial in the light of “the fluidity of the boundaries between those spatial categories” (Mkandawire 2003: 477), especially in the Westphalian Periphery. Indeed, if referring to the composition of various rebel movements, one can notice the mixture of rural and urban elements. As Stephen Ellis recently generalized from the experience of African countries,

“many rebel groups operating in recent years have been composed of people from both city and village or, more likely, of people who have spent much of their lives in between the two and cannot be easily described as either city people or village people” (Ellis 2003: 462).

At the same time, the violent nature of the confrontations in the war-torn countries has altered the sociological structure, forcing massive displacements of populations, both internal and external, with the internal displacement especially contributing to the “drain of population from rural areas towards the urban ones ... particularly the capital ones” (Ellis 2003: 463). Yet, despite the strength of such a critique, as it continues to have political consequences, the rural-urban dichotomy can maintain its validity as an analytical tool if, as Mkandawire stresses,

“the character of rebel movements ... [does] not refer to the eventual numerical composition of their ‘foot soldiers’, but rather to their origins, leadership and [at least the initial] agenda” (Mkandawire 2003: 478).





Additionally, the classical rural-urban dichotomy can be supplemented with the center-periphery opposition in relevant cases.

In this part, I will first refer to the relationship between warlordism and *praetorianism*. At the other extreme, I will differentiate between warlords and *criminal organizations* such as bandits, gangs, and mafia groups. Finally, the paper will deal with the *caudillo* system before inscribing the warlords into the world of *insurgent* movements among guerrillas and militia groups.

### 3.1 Warlordery as a form of praetorianism?

As already hinted above, one concept is constantly re-appearing in the scholarly writings on warlords and warlordism. As a radical form of militarization of society, *praetorianism* is used at least as a starting point by various analysts of the phenomenon. Besides the already mentioned reference to Anthony Vinci (2006), “praetorianism” is used as an analytical device by Edward McCord (1993) regarding the Chinese period of warlordism, by Paul Rich (1999) in reference to mainly African versions, and by Antonio Giustozzi (2005) in his synthesis of the modern faces of warlordism in various geographical and temporal locations. Justifying the respective utility of the concept, McCord refers to the political role of the Praetorian Guard in ancient Rome in the classical manner that defines praetorianism as

“a situation where the *military class* of a given society exercises independent political power within it by virtue of an actual or threatened use of military force” (my emphasis McCord 1993: 3).

Similarly, defining *praetorianism* in a Huntingtonian manner as “refer[ing]

to the intervention of the military into politics and the breakdown of the civil-military relations” (Rich 1999: 2) offers a reasonable cause for employing the term in the context of warlordism. Warlordism is indeed accompanied by militarization of society, and thus it captures the intervention if not the dominance of the use or threat of use of military force into politics. But how far can this conceptual framework lead the analysis of warlordism?

To answer this question, we should return to the development of the “praetorian perspective” as used by its classical proponents like Samuel Huntington (1968), Amos Perlmutter (1974, 1981), or Eric Nordlinger (1977) and which devised it as an analytical tool to aid the understanding of the common subject of military interventions of unstable, institutionally underdeveloped, and transitional societies in Latin America, Africa, or Asia. While the fundamental tenets of praetorianism – intervention of military in the political arena as a fracture of democratic civil-military relations or the weakness of political institutions – are maintained across the spectrum, the differences occur in the causal analysis of this intervention. While Huntington and his followers, in line with the thesis of the military as protectors of the state, consider that praetorianism is caused by weak societies lacking legitimate political institutions, Perlmutter (1974, 1981) and Nordlinger (1977) see the cause of praetorianism in military professionalism (Danopolous/Zirker 2002: 5). But even as there is enough space for controversy surrounding the causes of this particular relationship between armed forces and society, the “praetorian perspective” is united by its emphasis on the centrality of the state, as “the dominant classes and even institutions e.g. civil-military bureaucracy

function within the state and not as state" (Steans/Pettiford 2005: 55-58, 86-88). From here one can extract an important limitation of the use of praetorianism as the conceptual framework for the analysis of warlord systems.

Most importantly, the classical forms of praetorianism refer to the control of a central state by the military as an institution *per se*. As such, it is clearly a form of authoritarianism and collides with the ideal of a democratically organized state. However, unlike the situation in warlord systems, praetorianism remains defined by the existence of a central state, capable of enforcing its decisions over the national territory, especially as the political power is captured by the military class. Even more, due to the military take-over, it remains the political organization that is able to claim a monopoly over the violence; even if the legitimacy of its political domination may be contested by elements of civil society, the dominance of the military class radically diminishes the possibilities to contest the monopoly over violence. Some of these points of criticism are not overlooked by the scholars of warlordism. For instance, none of the authors mentioned above uses the concept of *praetorianism* as it was developed in the classical manner. Instead, they use the qualified terminology of "fragmented praetorianism" (McCord 1993: 6), introduced by Donald Sutton (1980) in reference to the Chinese situation. To a certain extent, the image of "orphan warlordism" (see Giustozzi 2005) does refer to a collapse of the political order concomitant to the maintenance of a military one, even if fragmented. The problem remains, though, as the military commanders in a warlord system exercise their control only on a local or regional basis, in contrast

with the control of the state by praetorianism within its internationally recognized borders.

The disappearance of the central state's authority creates such a distance between the canon of praetorianism and warlord systems that it makes even a qualified use of the former to describe the latter superfluous. The absence of any semblance of a unitary class able to bond the contestants of state's centralized monopoly over violence points in the same direction. As Lary shows, not even in the paradigmatic case of "fragmented praetorianism" – the early Republican China – can the hypothesis of belonging to the same social group (military elite) be proven functional. In a comparative analysis of some prominent warlords in Afghanistan such as Ismail Khan, Rashid Dostum or Malik Pahlawan a persuasive demonstration was given of the variety of social backgrounds, the nature of their organization, and their goals, along with the strategies for attaining those goals (Giustozzi 2003)<sup>11</sup>. While accepting that some of the prominent warlords of the Chinese period did in fact reflect the military elite of the fragmenting Imperial army, this was not true for all of them. Advancing to the contemporary situation, warlords continue to be highly-ranked officers in the collapsing state's army such as the Uzbek General Dostum in Afghanistan or General Aideed in Somalia. But in most cases the military commanders either derive from the lower ranks of the military (Ismail Khan) or are not related to the leadership of the state's military (Taylor in Liberia). Even more so, while some of the warlords situate themselves at the

11 Similarly, Schetter et al. (2006) opt for a typology of warlords which includes "the feudal warlordism" and the "fragmented warlordism" (Schetter *et al* 2006).





hierarchical apex of a regular army (usually one of the army corps of the former national army), most of them command in reality rather irregular forces who lack formal military training. Finally, while praetorian systems are organized around the military, warlordism inclines toward a charismatic regime, founded as it is on the possession of a military force.

### 3.2 Warlords and organized crime: mafias and bandits

The constant appeal to violence, the predatory nature, the control of economic local activities and transnational operations in the grey area of the economy all open up a comparison between the Mafia organizations and the warlord system. Pre-eminence of economic profit brings warlords closer to mafia groups than to the government, with its strict delineation of the public and private sphere (Reno quoted in Giustozzi 2003: 1). The commonalities extend further: they are both a form of social hybridization between modern and traditional forms of organization. They share a *modus operandi* based on one form or another of patronage, solidly entrenched in the charismatic type of authority. For example, the Sicilian mafias were defined as a

“personality-based form of organization involved in illegal (that is against the claims of the central authority) organized crime” (Anderson 1995).

Although their respective life-span as organizations varies considerably they are both long-term phenomena. Finally, mafia organizations and warlords are active in the shadow of the state. Despite these general similarities, warlords are not to be confused with Mafia groups’ leaders. Arguably the most fundamental differentiations refer to the nature of their organiza-

tion and control as well as the nature of their relation with the state in which they are active. Concerning the former, the warlords’ military group, of a considerably larger size than a mafia group, represents a clear form of military organization, even if formed by irregulars. At the same time, the warlord, unlike a Mafia boss, is autonomous from the collapsing state institutions. Mafia organizations, even if taking advantage of various state weaknesses, are not necessarily active in a collapsed state. As MacKinlay notes,

“the Mafia live as citizens of a free society in most cases, and their freedom to move and communicate is not guaranteed by their own military strength, but by the institutions of their host state” (MacKinlay, 2000: 78).

Not only is the state strong enough to guarantee that freedom but, as Schultz notes, mafias are

“organized groups, [which] pose a *clandestine* hierarchical structure and leadership whose primary purpose is to operate outside the law in a particular criminal enterprise” (Schultz, 2005: 23, my italics).

The separation between the realms of the legal and illegal inside the authority of the state conditions the existence and the nature of Mafia groups’ activities. Far from acting in a stateless society, the mafia’s success depends on its capacity to attract officials of the states into the “shadow economy”, thus, the importance of corruption in the analysis of Mafia organizations. By comparison, the existence of the state in a situation of warlordism is radically diminished, being limited to the area surrounding the capital. Outside this center there is competition between autonomous military commanders whose control over their regions is exercised openly through violence or threats of the use of violence. Unlike the situation characterizing Mafia activities, the discussion in terms of legality-illegality as

well as corruption is simply irrelevant when attached to the warlord system. Mafias are active on a punctuated equilibrium base, in the interstitial space between the legal and illegal market. Thus, its military power is explicitly exercised only intermittently and on a very small scale in opposition to the constant armed contestation of the central state's monopoly over violence in the case of the warlord system. What can be even more important, on a state-society axis, the Mafia's exercise of armed force is directed against the individual or small collectivities and not against the military forces. Warlords, on the contrary, even when they target individuals ultimately challenge the supremacy of the armed forces of the state.

The other figure with which the warlords are frequently related is the bandit. We might for instance take Rich's comments, according to which

"warlordism [- with its structures of hierarchical power, where leadership is based on various forms of patronage, nepotism and political clientelism] tends to be derived more from models of autocratic tribal rule or large-scale *gangsterism* rather than evolutionary wars of national liberation in which the main basis of support lies in the general civilian population" (Rich 1999: 5, my italics).

The allusion to gangsterism, be it of a large or small scale, once again has to do with the image of warlords as simply predatory armed groups raiding the territory while pillaging and looting. Interestingly enough, the debate on the warlord system in its Chinese phase constantly made reference to the existence of "bandits", with authorities

"manipulat[ing] the word to discredit their political enemies, and there was a widespread tendency to confuse banditry with other forms of association such as secret societies" (Billingsely 1988: 14).

Similar to Mafia groups,

"bandits did not engage in rebellion per se, for they did not seek or find allies among the peasantry or elites interested in challenging the state" (Barkey 1994: x)

The problematic of banditry as a marginal form of resistance has aroused particular interest. The classic work of Eric Hobsbawm (1969) is a central point of reference as it manifestly refers to one particular type of bandit,

"a form of individual or minority rebellion within peasant societies ... those who are not regarded as simple criminals by public opinion" (Hobsbawm 1969: 13).

Hobsbawm's investigation of the romanticized "social bandit" is placed in "transitional societies where tribal and kinship organization is disintegrating prior to the development of agrarian capitalism" (Mayaram 2003: 336). In a decisively exploitative environment, the "social bandit", strongly anchored on the side of the rural inhabitants, constitutes itself in what was described as a "pre-political ... primitive form of social protest" (ibid.). Although its social nature is given by the rural support of peasantry, banditry in this sense is characterized as representing

"a state of supposedly absent, or near absent, political consciousness or organization ... devoid of any explicit ideology, organization or programme" (Hobsbawm, quoted in Mayaram 2003: 336).

Reflecting his main sources – that is, poems and ballads in the tradition of the Robin Hood myth, the social bandit is indeed guilty of robberies and thus part of the universe of "organized crime". But this criminality is transformed into a form of resistance through the selectivity of its victims from among the oppressors – "rich and privileged" – in an attempt to re-establish a just equilibrium. As a result, unlike the warlords, bandits of such a type are clearly embedded in a social niche – peasantry in Hobsbawm's case. What the warlord







shares with this mythical figure is the armed forms of resistance – although with a higher degree of military organization and the lack of an ideological clout. But, unlike the social bandit whose resistance is aimed against the local oppressor, the regional warlord's organized challenge, far from being marginal, is directed equally against the expansion of military capacity of the state beyond the capital region as it is against an external invasion. More so, and again in opposition with the "social bandit", the warlord's contestation becomes possible due to substantial external support, support that further erodes the warlords' dependency on any particular social class. There are various types of what Skaperdas calls "forms of rent extraction" which constitute external instruments of patronage, of which he mentions

"the subsidization of some, if not all contestants, foreign investment in [licit or illicit] natural resource extraction, various forms of foreign aid" (Skaperdas 2002: 440).

As various analyses of the situation in Afghanistan point out, the bulk of the income for the military commanders is constituted by the subsidizing of military hardware, taxation of the trade routes, traffic of illicit products, and only lastly the international aid.

### 3.3 Caudillismo and the warlord system

A fascinating enterprise results from a discussion of warlordism in terms of a widespread analytical tool used in Latin American historiography, that of the caudillo and caudillo politics<sup>12</sup>.

12 As Antonio Giustozzi remarks, it was M. Riekenberg's work that introduced the study of warlordism as a parallel to the caudillo system (Giustozzi, 2005: 2). While I did not have access to the German work, my own parallel draws heavily on the Wolf and Hansen's 1967 article.

There are, not surprisingly, numerous similarities between the circumstances in which both caudillo and warlord politics emerged. Thinking of the caudillo

"as a military man, almost literally a man on a horseback who is at the same time the political boss and absolute ruler of a ... district within a country" (Chapman 1932: 282)

can only appeal to the scholar of warlord politics. Even more so, like warlord politics, colored by the nuances of personalism combined with localism, caudillaje is in essence a hybrid institution,

"half feudal, half "capitalist", caught between past and future, [which] exhibited characteristics of both ways of life, as well as their inherent contradictions" (Wolf and Hansen 1967: 170)<sup>13</sup>.

Sometimes described as an "agrarian warlord" (Andkerson 1984), the caudillo had a

"virtually independent power base and acted as a power broker between the central government and the local population" (Salamini, 1986: 767).

In the context of the establishment of a capitalist agriculture, the caudillo's independence is guaranteed by his ownership of an expanded agricultural land mass (*hacienda*) and his location at the heart of the financial upper class.

Fundamentally an economic enterprise able to flourish under the anarchic conditions of the post-Independence era of the weakly centralized Latin American states, Wolf and Hansen describe the caudillo system in terms applicable to that of warlordism, as being characterized by

"(1) the repeated emergence of armed patron-client sets, cemented by personal ties of

13 As Wolf and Hansen show, the "caudillo" can be described as "chieftain" while caudillo politics (or "caudillaje") refers to the condition of caudillo competition and rule (Wolf/Hansen, 1967: 169)

dominance and submission, and by a common desire to obtain wealth by force of arms; (2) the lack of institutionalized means for succession to offices; (3) the use of violence in political competition" (Wolf/Hansen 1967: 169).

Like the warlord, the caudillo is the beneficiary of the institutional decomposition: following the victorious Wars of Independence, the landowners quickly gained the control of disbanded armed troops, reviving a situation in which they "maintained armed retainers on their own territories" (Wolf/Hansen 1967: 168). The private nature of those armies coupled with the territorial dimension of the ownership of the *haciendas* constituted the twin instruments further used for promoting the economic interests of the caudillo.

Despite the numerous similarities above, for the purpose of analytical clarity the warlord system should be differentiated from that of a caudillo. First and most prominently, the concept of a caudillo was designed for the comprehension of power relations in the particular context of Latin American history. Second, unlike the warlord, whose power derives directly from his command over an armed band, the caudillo's power ultimately rests in his private ownership of the hacienda. Third, there is the question of the relations of those two actors with the external arena. While the caudillo's dependence on the pillaging of "free" resources on his labor-intensive, autarchic *hacienda* was given the final and lethal blow by external competition and the opening up of the markets, the warlord's existence itself is dependent on his capacity to interact with the regional, if not global environment. Finally, in opposition with the non-ideological nature of the warlord, the caudillo, defined as a political entrepreneur, made use not only of force, but also of a conser-

vative ideology to further his economic interests (Rouquie 1987: 153).

### 3.4 Warlord and the insurgent groups: guerilla and militias

Most substantially and constantly, warlords appear in the literature as a particular form of an insurgency movement. Thus, the warlords occupy a prominent place in at least one important attempt to build up a typology of modern insurgency movements in Africa (Clapham, 1996, 1998). For Clapham, those modern insurgencies could be framed into one of the four general groupings: liberation, separatist, reform(ist), and warlord insurgencies. Constructed around cases such as Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, the *liberation insurgencies* are defined as those "set out to achieve independence from colonial or minority rule" (Clapham 1998: 6). Fitting the cases of Sudan and Eritrea, the *separatist insurgencies*

"seek to represent the aspirations and identities of particular ethnicities or regions within an existing state, either by seceding from that state altogether, or else by pressing for some special autonomous status". (Clapham 1998: 6.)

Working towards establishing the state on new functional lines, the *reform insurgencies* "seek radical reform of the national government" (Clapham 1998: 6), as shown by the cases of the National Resistance Army in Uganda and the People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in Ethiopia. Finally, the disposition towards the state authority seems to differentiate the fourth category, that of *warlord insurgencies*. This, Clapham argues,

"arise[s] in cases where the insurgency is erected towards a change of leadership which does not entail the creation of a state different from that which it seeks to overthrow, and which may involve the creation [within the





boundaries of that weakened state] of a personal territorial fiefdom separate from existing state structures and boundaries" (Clapham 1998: 6)<sup>14</sup>.

It worth noting that while sometimes using them in an interchangeable manner, Clapham classifies the "guerilla" as a part of the wider concept of "insurgency". Thus, he defines "guerillas" as

"armed movements, usually originating in the countryside and often attacking across state frontiers, which have sought to contest the power of [African] states, and have frequently established their own forms of rule, in territories from which the control of established states has disappeared" (Clapham 1998: 1).

In this context, the warlord appears as a sub-species of the guerilla variety of insurgencies. But what then is an insurgency?

Reflecting the CIA's 1980s *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, Schultz proposed a definition of an insurgency as a

"protracted political and military set of activities with the goal of partially or completely gaining control over the territory of a country, involving the use of irregular military forces and illegal organizations, designed to weaken or destroy the power and legitimacy of a ruling government, while at the same time increasing the power and legitimacy of the armed insurgent group" (Schultz 2005: 11)

Since most of the common characteristics of guerrillas and warlords are obvious (armed contestation of the state's military, hierarchical nature of its organization, the charismatic forms of authority, the role of external support, and so on), I will focus on the

differences. At the wider (or maximal) end of the definition, insurgent movements are protracted politico-military activities designed to operate in the direction of capturing the state. The protracted nature, the aspect of legitimacy as well as the combination of (irregular) military and the political aspect (to which one may add the rural origin) all feature highly in the classical version of guerillas as described in its Maoist codification. In this model, the gradual increase of the organizational and military capabilities of the insurgency serves the ultimate aim of revolutionizing the state. In this sense, Mkandawire touched a vital point when showing how

"ideologies and organizational capacities have played an important role in guerilla warfare, and how they have affected its nature even within similar cultural contexts" (Mkandawire 2003: 479).

Thus, the popular support, and with it the "battle to win the hearts and minds" of the population becomes one of the most crucial aspects of an insurgency using guerrilla tactics.

In stark contrast, even if the control over the capital is more often sought by powerful warlords for the benefits associated with the nature of sovereignty in the international system, conquering the state is not essential. This is not to say that there are not various attempts of institutionalizing the power in a warlord system. As the case of Afghanistan shows, major warlords are often attracted by the perspective of occupying important functions not only in local government – the position of governor is often the key official position of the warlord - but also in the central government itself (Massoud, Fahim, Dostum, Hekmatyar, and more recently Ismail Khan have all occupied positions at the highest echelons of various Afghan governments). In the

<sup>14</sup> In addition to these four categories, Cilliers advocates the addition of a fifth, hybrid category, that of a "resource-based insurgency", an insurgency that "is in part a development of liberation insurgency after decolonialisation and the end of the Cold War, and overlaps and subsumes within it warlords insurgencies" (Cilliers, 2000, 4).





most extreme case, Charles Taylor even had himself elected President. Yet there are rather few cases in which the co-optation in the central government positions is accompanied by an abandonment of the control of private military forces.

Given the localized and non-ideological nature of the warlord, the organization of the state on the revolutionary principles of an ideology is another point of disjunction between the warlords and guerilla movement. The coordinates of guerilla warfare in its classical formulation of course starts from the initial stage of a localized form of resistance but essentially envisages an expansion in the following stages, closing up with a direct confrontation of the state's military forces – thus the transformation from irregular to regular forces and the corresponding transformation in tactics. Again with a few exceptions, nothing like these transformations is envisaged in a warlord realm. Finally, numerous analysts of warlordism make reference to what could be called “the detachment from population”, as a result of the warlord's lack of dependency on support from the population<sup>15</sup>. MacKinlay refers to this “detachment” in describing how

“the Chinese warlord ... had established himself from the power base of a former provincial leader, and thus endowed, could afford to take a rapine attitude towards the local population in the short term ... in stark contrast with Mao's forces who ... had to rely on widespread popular support” (MacKinlay 2000: 73)<sup>16</sup>.

15 My own position tries to depart from the “detachment from population” thesis towards an alternative of “indirect attachment”.

16 Both positions reflect an idealization of the situations. While there were numerous cases in which the Chinese warlords were actively involved in the provision of public goods, Mao didn't hesitate to use mass killings to obtain fear-induced compliance rather than “widespread popular support”.

At the minimal end of insurgency's definition, there are irregular armed forces operating within a weak state whose total control they may or may not seek to obtain. Those groupings, often associated with ethnic, tribal, or clan linkages, could be clustered under the generic name of militias. Of all forms of insurgencies, militias are the closest to the armed organization of a warlord, leading numerous authors to use the terms almost synonymously. As shown by Jackson, Alice Hills, for instance, uses the term “militia” as an alternative to “warlord” in a manner that has since been followed (Jackson 2003). For other sophisticated analysts, warlords appear as a subspecies of militia armed groups. Jackson, for instance, creates a tripartite typology of militias as a function of their loyalties and organizational structures: *freelance militias*, the least disciplined and trained of all militia types, defined as “bandits who are not tied to specific geographical area and are frequently present in small groups” (Jackson 2003: 142); *clan militias* whose “loyalties [are directed towards] specific areas and peoples, shared history and enmities, etc” (Jackson 2003: 142); and finally *personal militias* as “relatively well-armed [groups of] men acting on behalf of a recognized individual, ideology or ethnic groups” (Jackson 2003: 142). Similarly, in Schultz's typology, the warlord is the leader of an organized militia group, exercising an organized and even charismatic command, in opposition to the clan militias which

“function under decentralized collective leaderships that seek to protect or advance the interests of the clan, in the absence of an identifiable leader” (Schultz 2005: 18).

In opposition to the insurgencies using guerrilla tactics, the concept of



“militia” neither superimposes an ideological stance, nor does it require the aim of conquering the state power.

What this incursion in the literature shows is the prominence of the military and economic dimensions of the complex phenomenon of warlordism to the detriment of its broader socio-political one. One way of moving beyond the superficial pejorative labeling of “warlordism” toward a more refined analysis of its nature and attributes is to follow Antonio Giustozzi’s call for a detailed examination of the processes through which the ‘warlords’ acquire a certain type of legitimacy that transforms them

into ‘rulers’ (Giustozzi 2003: 2).

Indeed, following the path opened by Reno, he suggests an analysis of current “warlord politics” as representative of a new “logic of organization” (Reno 1998: 79). Although this novel social order is based on a personal, profit-driven control over the means of organized violence, it does nonetheless involve a social dimension. In attempting to legitimize their existence and to achieve a minimal level of political allegiance, warlords substitute for an absent or dysfunctional state in the sphere of public security and protection, but also in various forms of job provision and even social welfare (Oberson 2002: 89)<sup>17</sup>.

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17 In conditions of war and the consequential devastation of the local rural economy, the advantages of membership in a private militia outweigh the advantages of civilian occupations. The tasks of those military groups should not be limited to their combatant status: as Conrad Schetter noticed in studying Afghanistan, their main tasks are “to collect taxes from the inhabitants in return for ensuing security and to take tolls from foreigners crossing their checkpoints” (Schetter 2004: 8).



## 4. Warlordery and the provision of social services

As seen, with few exceptions, most analysts of the phenomenon of warlordism share MacKinlay's view that the warlord is conceptually opposed not only to the virtuous form of governance characteristic of the modern state but also to its feudal predecessors whose status in the local community depended on both the extent of his military prowess and social responsibility toward the community under his control. For MacKinlay the warlord who "occupied territory in a strictly predatory manner ... was a negative phenomenon" (MacKinlay 2000: 71), in contrast with local rulers who

"performed important social functions, supporting religion, culture and encouraging some aspects of a primitive form of civil society" (ibid.).

Even in approaches that situate non-state armed groups in the process of "building authority directly through commerce" in a violent environment there is a propensity towards ignoring the dimension of provision of social services:

"...this strategy obviates the need to build bureaucracies, since warlord political authority that fails to replace the state would make no pretension of carrying out state-like functions" (Reno 1998: 94).

### 4.1 Warlords: between economic interests and the social arena

Against this view, I will present examples where warlords attempt to substitute both state and traditional elites in mediating between various social functions, especially in the realm of infrastructure (road construc-

tion) and the health and education systems.

Based on his extensive research on modern Afghanistan, Antonio Giustozzi stresses the limitations of a perspective depicting warlords as driven strictly by the pursuit of their economic interests and reluctant to perform social functions. On the contrary, he argues that

"social status derives from the control of security rather than of money, ... these warlords are more akin to politicians than to businessmen, in that what they are looking for is power rather than money as an end in itself" (Giustozzi 2003: 2)<sup>18</sup>.

In discussing the nature of public services in the context of the so-called "weak states", Robert Rotberg refers to a hierarchy of political goods, at the top of which, in the Hobbesian tradition, he places the supply of security:

"the state's prime function is to provide that political good of security: ... to prevent cross-border invasions, infiltrations and any loss of territory ... to eliminate domestic threats ... to prevent crime and any related dangers to domestic human security ... and to enable citizens to resolve their disputes with the state and with their fellow inhabitants without recourse to arms or other forms of physical coercion" (Rotberg 2003: 3).

Along with the provision of security, health care, education, transport, and communication infrastructure, as well as the rule of law and political participation, together constitute the bulk of public goods expected to be pro-

<sup>18</sup> One of the methods of legitimizing their control remains the involvement in the provision of social services. Even the infamous Osama bin Laden's financial contribution to the Mujahidin's resistance appears not to be limited to the acquisition of military equipment, but also to extend to the building of a hospital and the importing of agricultural machines (Davies, quoted in Schetter 2004: 9).



vided by the state structures. In the context of warlordism, a collapsed state is obviously incapable of providing these goods. In the worst cases the state even becomes the most poisonous threat to the lives and security of its citizens. If the distinction between bandits and organized criminals on the one hand and warlords on the other is to have any meaning it is important to stress that warlordery indeed requires “the development and maintenance of a [certain] social order” (Chan 1999: 165). It is therefore only legitimate to ask how that social order could be constituted under warlord-controlled violence.

As with the state, the prime social function that armed groups take upon themselves to provide is in the area of protection. Sanin and Baron show how paramilitary units and guerilla insurgents in Colombia are in fact the only agents that have both the capability and the will to limit the spread of some forms of local crime and violence by repressing petty criminals:

“FARC’s legitimacy seems to have been related to the ‘cleaning off’ of small-time offenders and the establishment of social order in a territory devoid of effective mechanisms of social regulation” (Sanin and Baron 2005: 9).

Evidence of similar activities in the

“establishment and maintenance of basic law and order, and re-enforcement of mechanisms of survival in a particular area or among a particular section of the populace” (Nourzhanov 2005: 110)

are reported from research on the Central Asian former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan (Nourzhanov) as well as Sierra Leone where, at least initially, the Kamajors militias were “providing security to communities and enforcing social norms that most people considered legitimate” (Reno 2003)

A few analyses move away from approaching warlordism as simply

violent predation or a primitive form of “racketeering” to emphasize the potential, though by no means ubiquitous, dimension of some forms of social services provision<sup>19</sup>. Giustozzi, for instance, warned of the existence of “political complexes” in which military aspects are intrinsically linked with economic, political, and, most important from the point of view of this essay, the social dimensions:

“a more sophisticated type of warlord may develop some form of partial legitimacy and transform his dominion into a ‘proto-state’, ... a structure featuring some sort of civilian administration and providing at least some services, such as education, policing, electricity and other supplies, public transport, etc.” (Giustozzi 2003: 2).

While the most compelling evidence of these aspects are the fresh insights on the Chinese case of the 1920s and 1930s, contemporary cases, among which Afghanistan is prominent, also contain elements that justify his remarks.

In an analysis of the state-society relationship in China under warlords, Alfred Lin concludes that

“care and control made up the two sides of a warlord’s strategy of governance: care laid the foundation of stable rule, whereas control served as the means to safeguard this foundation” (Lin 2004: 151).

The causes of this combination were threefold. First, for reasons that had to do more with the construction of legitimacy and maintenance of this control over a long-term period, the

<sup>19</sup> These services appear under conditions of war due to the necessity to supply war factions. For instance, in areas otherwise far too remote from government control to benefit from infrastructural works, war was the environment that led to the development of a new infrastructure: Nouristan or Hazarajat witnessed the development of a “new infrastructure including roads, hotels and bazaars due to the need for secure supply routes for the resistance” (Schetter 2004: 6).



warlord had to expand his activities beyond the issue of military control. In Lin's words,

"[the] warlord could not afford to ignore the needs of society, for satisfying such needs (or at least making attempts to satisfying such needs) was vital to the credibility and survival of its regime" (Lin 2004: 1).

Second, as a permissive cause, unlike the state that was limited in its enterprises by the scope of its shrinking budgetary revenues,

"a warlord would have little problems funding some social welfare projects, for he always had recourse to extra-budgetary sources of revenues to finance desired undertakings" (Lin 2004: 1).

Third, competition with the central state's provisions forced warlords to act directly in the arena of social services as

"the administration of welfare and philanthropy by a warlord was an integral part of his drive toward total control of the society" (Lin 2004: 1).

Lin supports his argument that "residual [Chinese] warlords" contributed to the efforts of economic development by referring to a study by Donald Gilpin that

"[highlights] the Shanxi warlord Yan Xishan's ambitious program of rapid industrialization in the 1930s [to show how] ... in order to provide their armies with the latest weapons and other necessities, warlords were compelled to build factories and otherwise develop the productive resources of their domains" (Lin 2002: 178);

Even if the efforts were dominated by the need to remain competitive in the market of violence, the result nevertheless impacted not only the military, but also the civil population. The focus of Lin's research is the activity of Guangdong's "residual warlord" Chen Jitang between 1929 and 1936. Admitting the serious limitations of what could be achieved by society

under warlords, Lin (2002: 178-179) mentions nevertheless some accomplishments. Among these are the relative security provided by the suppression of petty banditry or vigorous highway constructions, neither of which the central state was able or willing to undertake<sup>20</sup>. The heavy investment in industrial development seems to be specific to Chinese warlordery, as in Chen Jitang's promotion and protection of the cement or sugar industries (Lin 2002: 200).

Another aspect was illuminated in the breaking-up of the former Yugoslavian state in the 1990s. Here, militia leaders, as relief agencies discovered, "assumed the role of indispensable service-providers rather than cross-border smugglers" (Dietl 2004: 64). From Somalia to Sudan, from Sierra Leone to Afghanistan, humanitarian organizations have worked with and through local warlords who positioned themselves as guarantors of relief and used their local networks in re-distributing those external resources ranging from food aid to basic medical services.

Afghanistan is a powerful case to illustrate this argument: in 1992, at the end of Najibullah's grip on power, warlords controlled the majority of

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<sup>20</sup> Chen Jitang's success in constructing road infrastructure is quite impressive: according to Lin's data, if before his taking up of leadership in 1929, Guangdong had only 3,661 kilometers of highways, at the end of his rule in 1935, the province was leading all provinces in the realm of highway networks with a staggering 17, 587 kilometers completed (Lin 2002: 179). Investing in the building -up of roads and highways that serve primarily military goals is a feature often met in the literature dedicated to non-state actors controlling the means of organized violence. The fact that their construction was due to private, military interests should not obscure their nature as having dual use, nor should it lead observers to ignore the incapacity of the local state to efficiently engage in those projects.





provinces in Afghanistan (Saikal 2004: 207). Among them, the most substantial substitute systems of governance in the face of the atrophy of the central authority were the ones founded by Ahmad Shah Massoud and Ismail Khan. In the Eastern provinces under his control, due to energetic support from a mixture of sources such as USAID or NGOs such as the *Swedish Committee for Afghanistan* and the UK's *Afghan AID*, Massoud was involved in social projects ranging from engineering to health projects (building clinics and attracting doctors) and education provision (Rubin 2002: 220). Working toward the building up of what Barnett Rubin considers to be "the most extensive proto-state in Afghanistan" (ibid: 234), Massoud's *Shura-yi Nazar-i Shamali* grew as an administrative system that incorporated committees dealing with

"judicial and military affairs, civil administration, finances and economy, culture and education, health, political affairs, intelligence and Kabul affairs" (Rubin, 2002: 235).

Similar reports show that, while the northern province of Balkh was run

"almost totally separated from the central government, ... basic services such as schools and health centers [were] funded by a combination of resources from regional leaders and international aid" (Peake 2003: 188).

Another spectacular case is that of the self-titled "Amir of Western Afghanistan", Ismail Khan.

Herat in Western Afghanistan was dominated by the charismatic military commander Ismail Khan for about twenty years until his replacement as governor by President Hamid Karzai in 2004. Under his tight control, Herat was transformed into what can arguably be seen as the best administered, most secure, and least corrupt city in the war-torn Afghanistan, its people "enjoying better living standards, higher literacy and more re-

sponsive administration" (Dietl 2004: 62). Not only did essential public services work in Herat, but relatively large numbers of women had access to education (George 2002) and opium cultivation maintained a low profile. The reconstruction boom that took place in Herat under Khan's leadership was funded partially through his international connections to Pakistan, and allegedly mainly Iran, but also through the customs taxes that Khan often refused to share with what he saw as a weak central authority in Kabul. This significant domestic extraction allowed him to maintain an outstanding degree of autonomy in relation with its patrons and to finance the largest personal army in Afghanistan<sup>21</sup>.

A large part of the tax revenues was spent on public projects, in particular infrastructural works. Thus, following high-level agreements with officials from Pakistan, he was actively involved in a regional project to open a secure route from Quetta to Kandahar to Herat reaching Ashkhabad in Turkmenistan (Dietl 2004: 48)<sup>22</sup>. The rise of the Taliban and their military success blocked the project which would have significantly increased the revenues of Khan's system and would have propelled Herat even more towards being a hub of the regional trade. What is illustrative of the diversity of his financial and po-

<sup>21</sup> As in all research on Afghanistan, reliable numbers are difficult to provide. Yet most reports center around the amount of between 60 and 80 million USD a year as a result of his taxing the highly circulated route to Iran and Turkmenistan through Herat, while the numbers of the soldiers in his army allegedly rose to 10,000.

<sup>22</sup> According to Dietl, Khan had meetings with the Minister of the Interior Naseerullah Babar and even Prime Minister Benazhir Bhutto in 1993. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld also met Khan in Herat on April 27, 2002.



litical sources is that he started work – with Iranian support – on rebuilding the road linking Herat with the Iranian border city of Qala, at the same time as he initiated works to restore important regional irrigation canals to functionality (Marsden 2003). In a fundamentally traditional, patrimonial manner, Ismail Khan was active in the market of social services: in the field of justice “by holding weekly audiences where he dispenses money, advice, divorce and decisions on family disputes” or in the areas of health and education, “by setting up schools and hospitals” (Dietl 2004: 54). Anecdotally, his cultural administration seems to have gone as far as authorizing and protecting a team of archaeologists (Roy 2004: 35). Without stepping out of his military capacity, Khan was heavily involved in the provision of public goods funded through a skillfully maintained balance between domestic extraction and a variety of external sources ranging from states to NGOs and international organizations. As a result, an astute Afghan observer like Ahmed Rashid could write that

“under his authoritarian control, Herat became the most peaceful and cleanest Afghan city, a place where western aid workers can work without fear, 75% of children now go to school and ... the business of rebuilding homes and shops is booming” (Rashid 2002: 13-14).

To understand the longevity of these warlords, as well as the mechanisms of the provision of some public goods, one needs to look at the nature of Afghan political culture, with its patrimonial dynamic of interaction in which power is measured by the ability to create and maintain political adherence inside the networks of solidarity through the over-present aspect of redistribution in a system of “asymmetric reciprocity” (Rubin 2004). In my view, the crux of the

matter is the process through which the power and authority of the warlords depends not only on their military prowess, but also on their ability to interact and cooperate with the traditional forms of authority underlying Afghanistan’s micro-societies in redistributing resources.

In terms of redistribution, the channels of the networks of solidarity were, and continue to be more open to the traditional bearers of authority, be they clan or village elders (“white beards”), khans, mullahs, or pirs. Yet the comparative advantage of the warlord resides in his connectivity to the globalized markets and its de-territorialized nature. It is this global connectivity that Duffield has in mind when he writes that warlords “act locally but think globally” (in Goodhand, 2004: 159). A clear expression of this connectivity is provided by the numerous linkages that the top military commanders have with

“institutions beyond the traditional localized continuum: [transnational] Islamic parties, foreign countries, [NGOs] and international organizations” (Saikal 2004: 208).

Access to a variety of sources allows the warlord to surpass the traditional local leadership in his capacity to attract resources. In a sense, the warlord exists in the tradition of the local notable

“who not only is able to secure its group’s autonomy in relation with the state, but one who can attract and canalize the maximum aid from the state or other sources towards its own group, simultaneous with the capacity to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in its domestic affairs” (Roy 2004: 24).

But as his power is based neither on a given territory nor on direct administration, he needs the cooperation of various solidarity groups, be they secular (tribal or clan-dominated) or religious. Warlordism as developed in Afghanistan is definitely a form of



patrimonialism sharing with the Weberian ideal type the fundamental personal nature of power. Yet it departs from the ideal type in that the power of the military leader, beyond its charismatic element and its foundation in the control over the means of organized violence, depends on a dynamic process of bargaining with various incarnations of local solidarity networks whose channels are vitally important for the distribution of resources. This is, essentially, a different configuration of social control than the one imagined by a patrimonial leader controlling the military means in isolation from other social forces<sup>23</sup>.

#### 4.2 Warlord order, state, and society

While it is hard to avoid the conclusion that warlordism's most propitious environment is the shriveling of the state's functional ability to maintain its monopoly over organized violence, the relationship between warlordism and an arguably weakened state is far more complex than that depicted in a crude zero-sum view. It is obvious that warlord systems do not develop in a fully detached manner from the wider social system. We have seen how the "economy of war" literature places war-

lordism in a global economic system. What about the political, social, and cultural context in which it develops?

Without exception, all the samples of warlordism examined are circumscribed to a political context defined by the formal existence of a collapsing state. Is this evidence enough to conclude that warlords indiscriminately "seek to overthrow [the state] in order to secure their own form of military autocratic rule" (Rich 1999: xv), as the conventional view on warlordism seems to assume? The Chinese warlord period after the disintegration of the Manchu Empire in 1911 and particularly between the 1920s and 1930s should constitute the starting point of an attempt to offer a well-argued answer. There seems to be a general consensus which supports and extends Lin's assertion that Chen Jitang and other military leaders did not have ambitions to expand their rule beyond the provinces under their own control and definitely no ambitions to overtake the state (Lin 2002: 183). While the warlords had no intention of expanding their power to the entire state, they did seize power in the provinces out of the state control and organized a *de facto* autonomous governance serving their own private interests with little or no contact with the central government.

What is happening in the post-Cold War era to justify a scholar analyzing the challenges to central authority in collapsed states writing that "the several battles take place *within* the state, not against it" (Rotberg 2003: 15)? Nourzhanov is one of the rare voices to introduce a radical disjunction from the traditional view on warlordism as viscerally opposed to the state when he mentions the rise of a particular category of warlords "who not so much confront or tolerate the state, but work in partnership

<sup>23</sup> Olivier Roy differentiates between warlords and military local commanders as a qualitatively different and supra-ordinated form of military commanders. While both are non-territorial entities whose power originate in their military prowess, the local military commander is "soluble" in the traditional society, without exercising a civil role and without delegating its powers. In contrast, a warlord has to expand his authority beyond the local incarnations of the solidarity group to reach a regional leadership and create a larger degree of autonomy in relation to those groups. Thus, a warlord is "a military commander which builds up a local power based on a private army but who maintains a proto-stately administration" (Roy 2004: 34; 2003: 5-6).





with it" (Nourzhanov 2005: 111). Cases as diverse as Sierra Leone, Columbia, and Afghanistan point in the same direction because local warlords, while involved in a military confrontation against the central authorities, do benefit from the existence of the state in its weakened condition. Colombia contains a complex relationship between the state and the paramilitary which are tied together through a multitude of contradictory relationships, being simultaneously linked

"as all[ies], as competitor[s] in an oligopolistic market for the provision of security, as parasite[s], and as military adversar[ies]" (Sanin and Baron 2005: 25).

The cases examined by William Reno (1998) in Africa tend to emphasize the importance for warlords of capturing the state, or at least of being able to use its globally recognized sovereignty in order to increase their ability to secure external patronage. In Afghanistan, in line with traditional political forces, the warlords have in fact "a need for a distant and benevolent state, whose existence they do not challenge" (Roy 2003: 2). An expression of this connection between the warlord and an unobtrusive state is the ease with which the government of President Karzai was able to incorporate into its structures powerful regional controllers of organized violence, such as the generals Fahim and Dostum or Ismail Khan.

Afghanistan indeed reflects Giustozzi's observation that

"over time, a line will increasingly be drawn between those warlords who succeeded in being integrated within the state structure *on their own terms, maintaining their autonomous sources of power*, and those who will by contrast be weakened by their inclusion in the state structure" (Giustozzi 2003: 15, my italics).

The concept of an oligopoly of violence that was introduced by Andreas

Mehler in the African context is applicable to various crisis regions in which the European model of a state monopoly over violence has limited empirical value. Inspired by the economists' understanding of an oligopoly as an imperfect form of competition in which there are only a few providers of a product or a service in opposition with multiple buyers, Mehler describes an oligopoly of violence as the particular arrangement between security providers, comprising "a fluctuating number of partly competing, partly co-operating actors of violence of different quality" (Mehler 2004: 540-541). Acknowledging the variety in oligopolies of violence<sup>24</sup>, the specific characteristic of this particular structure of the "market of violence" is given exactly by "the mixture of competition and complementarities of rules, claims and authorities" (Mehler 2004: 541).

Warlordism emerges as a form of governance defined by "oligopolies of violence" in which the state remains one among other actors in the market of violence. Warlords are autonomous actors whose power and autonomy are based in their possession of an efficient military force, but can they truly be taken in isolation from both state and society? As shown in this paper, the warlord is a significant actor in a situation characterized by an asymmetry between a previously "strong society" and a "weak state" (Migdal 1988). He is autonomous in the sense that, although active in the

24 Mehler distinguishes between *territorial oligopolies of violence* (as clusters of relatively stable arrangements based on various monopolies over violence within borders of specific areas), *functional oligopolies of violence* (where "different violence actors/protectors provide security for different kinds of threats, from different kinds of aggressors or for specific social categories"), and *temporal oligopolies of violence* (Mehler 2004: 542).



territory (or territories) nominally under the control of a state, there is no higher authority (including the state) capable of regulating or dictating his actions. Thus, the warlord co-exists with both the state and various communal networks of the society but is not within military reach of any of them. However, the warlord's autonomy, while derived from the strength of his military force, is maintained and perpetuated not by ignoring society or the state but by positioning himself in a nodal relationship not only with the targeted state and society but with other actors such as states, international organizations, international non-governmental organizations, transnational corporations, and the like<sup>25</sup>.

Warlords maintain a parasitic relationship with both state and society while breaking from a unique dependency on either the various networks of solidarity or the state. As

long as the warlord is capable of manipulating the flow of resources *within* the weak institutional edifice of the state he has no incentive in the further development of state structures. In a sense, the warlord does not govern as most of the time he is not directly involved in the provision of public goods. If Afghanistan is to serve as an example, the functions of governance in areas as diverse as education, training, agriculture, irrigation systems, and such were transferred/outsourced to various NGOs, by both central government (like the Taliban) and the local warlords (Schetter 2004: 12). The warlord, though, is active in attracting resources to allow public goods to be provided as well as in setting up the conditions under which NGOs or other external actors are allowed to operate. Accordingly, the nature of governance for the communities under his control depends on his actions and on his positioning in the network of actors capable of governing.

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<sup>25</sup> There are numerous instances in which those actors cooperated in one way or another with various warlords: the US support for the warlords-to-be in the Afghan-Soviet war, for instance, and their cooperation in the anti-Taliban campaign. In another example, Liberia under the control of Charles Taylor's NPFL became France's "third largest African supplier of logs" (Reno 1998: 97); both Pakistan and most of all Iran are allegedly heavily involved in supporting the one or the other Afghan warlord. There are also religious groups involved in cooperation with warlords in varying parts of the world. Multinational corporations such as Shell Oil in Nigeria, Executive Outcomes, etc; non-governmental organizations such as the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, Oxfam, etc.

## 5. Beyond banditry: understanding warlordism from a governance perspective

From the above analysis, we can wrap together a few characteristics of warlords and warlord polities. First of all, the warlord appears in those parts of the Westphalian Periphery in which the formal state institutions crumble under the combined pressures from the traditional loci of political authority and the melting down of the Cold War support for the central authorities. Undoubtedly, the warlord's source of primary power is located in his private possession of military power, power that he is forced to exhibit periodically and to eagerly defend against any attempt of dispossession coming either from a central authority, fellow warlords, or external intervention. To compensate for the weak political authority deriving from his autonomous use of violence, the warlord becomes a central player in the market of violence, using his position in the global economy of war to attract various resources while at the same time avoiding locking himself into dependency on a single source.

Though the central asset that raises the interest of the warlord is procurement of guns, his resources cover a wider range, from canalizing aid to attracting foreign NGOs in the provision of basic services such as food, health, or education. His political position depends not only on his military prowess but also on his ability to secure those resources as well as on the extent to which he is embedded in various solidarity networks capable of redistributing those resources in turn.

Far from being a homogenous phenomenon, warlordism is a highly heterogeneous one. Although some of its existing forms may develop into

stable alternative forms of governance in an oligopoly of violence framework, this is likely to occur in only a few instances. It appears promising to investigate the circumstances under which warlords – in the absence of efficient state mechanisms of redistribution – move from the purely predatory behavior of ordinary thugs and advance towards less extensive forms of governance in both scope and intensity.

Within rational choice theory, a powerful mechanism for this explanation is exposed by Mancur Olson's perspective captured in the transition from "roving" to "stationary" bandits (Olson 1993). Olson deals with exactly this problematic, trying to rationalize the conditions under which the negative consequences of a roving, extortionist bandit can be tamed by inducing incentives for the provision of some social services. Under the inspiration of Sheridan's 1966 pioneering work on Chinese warlords, as he himself acknowledges, Olson's response uses insights from the "logic of collective action" permeated by assumptions of rationality and long- vs. short-term perspective. How are the extortionist practices of pillaging and robbing transformed into 'acceptable' practices? His answer to this question lies in the provision of a modicum of social services in exchange of taxation which in turn is appropriated by the stationary bandit. In Olson's words,

"if a roving bandit rationally settles down and takes his theft in the form of regular taxation and at the same time maintains a monopoly on theft in his domain, then those from whom he exacts taxes will have an incentive to produce ... The rational stationary bandit will take only a part of income in taxes





because he will be able to exact a larger total amount of income from his subjects if he leaves them with an incentive to generate income that he can tax" (Olson 1993: 568).

In other words, the transition from "roving" to "stationary" bandit is due to the potential for increasing the longevity of the rent extracted. The stationary bandit transformed into an autocratic king

"has an encompassing interest in his domain that makes him limit his predations because he bears a substantial share of the social losses resulting from these predations (...) the second way in which the encompassing interest of the stationary bandit changes his incentives is that it gives him an incentive to provide public goods that benefit his domain" (Olson quoted in Mair 2003: 14).

This explanation works under the assumption that the provision of public goods increases the productivity of the domain under which the bandit-cum-king exercises a monopoly over both violence and taxation, which in turn maximizes the source of [taxable] income for the stationary bandit.

As attractive as the model may be due to its simplicity and elegance, it unfortunately suffers from a few weaknesses. Olson doesn't address the cost problem of first establishing the monopoly over violence intrinsic to the transition from a "roving" to a "stationary" rebel; nor does he address the cost problem of maintaining it. Furthermore, like attempts of replicating the early state-formation processes in the contemporary era, Olson's framework neglects the capacity of armed groups' leaders to externalize the social costs of their domination. In the Cold War era, the system of patronage under which the superpowers were able to pursue their proxy wars and avoid the release of an all-out hot war offered the warlords and their fellow rebel groups the perfect opportunity for exactly such an externaliza-

tion. With the end of the Cold War, though,

"patronage has been replaced by the exploitation of easily accessible natural resources ... the exploitation of diamonds, cobalt, hardwood and the like" (Cilliers 2000: 5).

Recent studies have emphasized the fact that not only the control of a territory but the control of a population is relevant for the warlord. Inspired by his study of African cases, MacKinlay, for instance, notes that

"to a much greater extent than before, the control of the civilian population was a primary objective of the warlord" (MacKinlay 2000: 75-76).

The desire to control the population for the purpose of increasing its productivity and thus the income generated through taxation seems perfectly rational in Olson's scenario. The puzzling fact, though, is the generalized poverty of the areas under warlords' control. Taxing what is already a pauper population doesn't make much sense, and even less so investing in social services for this purpose, especially when income from trade, smuggling, and subsidized weaponry is significantly higher. Why then the conscious efforts to control the population?

If the assumption of rationality is maintained, poverty of the local population forces the predator towards alternative sources: either natural resources (diamonds, oil, etc.) or ransom practices. A scenario may be imagined in which the warlord "captures" the population in the region under his control, not so much for extracting his revenue from the population itself, but for building up his external legitimacy. After all, as Mair puts it,

"if development assistance balances the social losses of warlordism and provides social services, warlords are able to continue maximiz-

ing the economic exploitation of the territory under their control" (Mair 2003: 14).

Furthermore, it is hard to ignore the gigantic quantitative increase in the contribution of international aid and development agencies in situations of conflict. For Afghanistan, this situation forced every rebel group to open up offices to Peshawar or another capital to coordinate the aid to be received in areas under their control. Similarly, in other geographical locations

"[warlords acted] in a way that encouraged the flow of relief to continue ... in the Horn of Africa [for example] warlords even organized subunits of their factions to interface with the aid communities, which were ... versed in the aid-speak of empowerment, capacity building and civil society" (MacKinlay 2000: 76).

It may thus be argued that the contemporary warlord is not dependent on domestic extraction. He does not "control" the population but rather keeps it "captive". The participation of foreign humanitarian intervention (NGOs, IGOs, and the like) might be thus explored as a form of "ransom". Some of the public services (such as health and education) are not performed by warlords but by external actors from which the warlord extracts resources. Paying attention to those aspects, we may obtain an answer as to why some services are performed, as the warlord is interested not in its domestic "legitimation" function deriving from this performance, but in the negotiations with the actors interested in performing those functions.

So, the tentative answer to the question under which conditions so-

cial services are provided in the context of warlordism could refer to at least three factors. First, the sources of wealth on which the warlord can draw are important. If these are preponderantly extracted from the domestic arena then it is highly probable that the Olson scenario is applicable. If these in turn refer to natural resources (mines, oil, timber, etc.), drug trafficking, or taxing trade, a better analysis might be informed by an analysis constructed upon the economy of war paradigm. Ultimately, if the main source of income is extracted from external sources, then a focus on the role of humanitarianism should be emphasized as it is the role played by various sponsors including states, development agencies, or even diasporas and individual actors.

Second, attention should be paid to the nature (structure, functions, and dynamics) of the traditional politico-social authority and their sources of strength. An analysis following this path should include an investigation of the initial balance between central and local/traditional authority; it should draw on the neo-patrimonial literature underlying the role of traditional structures of social power acting in a globalized environment and emphasize the roles and strengths of various solidarity groups, including the trans-national, religious networks.

Finally, it is essential to identify the various strategies of the international community in "warlord management" (van Grieken 2005), as well as the role of humanitarian aid, NGOs, and other external actors.







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## Security Actors in Liberia and Sierra Leone *Roles, Interactions and Perceptions*

*Andreas Mehler / Judy Smith-Höhn*

International interventions may impede the establishment or restoration of sovereignty in collapsed or failed states – a risk which certainly exists in the cases of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Such intervention initially leads to the emergence of "quasi-states" whose administrative and security apparatus cannot function without external support. Massive interventions by external actors have undoubtedly played a key role in bringing civil wars to an end, but when it comes to consolidating statehood, a "one-size-fits-all" strategy is often adopted which can have extremely problematical outcomes.

The short- and medium-term effects of intervention may therefore diverge widely. A comprehensive political, as opposed to a purely technical, analysis of the UN's own peace missions is rarely undertaken. Often, the approach adopted is to treat peacebuilding as a mainly operational process, using blueprints which specify which institutions must be established and which systems must be introduced, with technical aspects tending to take priority. Little account is taken of local political mechanisms, capacities and conflicts, and minimal importance is attached to safeguarding their continued existence.

If Liberia and Sierra Leone are to be released from the international community's custodianship without slipping back into major armed conflict, new strategies are needed. The international community has a choice: to embark on long-term commitments extending beyond the customary 5-10

years, or to recognise political and social realities in the local non-state security sector. What most Liberians want is a functioning state based on the Western model. In reality, however, this particular option is an illusion which is only nurtured by the UN peace missions.

In order to gain an understanding of the difficulties of reconstructing the collapsed states of Liberia and Sierra Leone, a brief historical overview is provided below, focussing on politics, security and violence in both countries. We then explore the opportunities for and limits to the strategies adopted by external intervention forces in relation to security. A key focus of attention is the involvement of local government and local people and the emergence of a sense of ownership.

The fourth section comprises a more detailed analysis of local capacities and the security perceptions of residents of the Liberian capital Monrovia. The statistical data used here was collected during field research undertaken in Liberia from November 2005 to February 2006. The evaluation of the quantitative survey from Sierra Leone was not completed at the time of writing this paper; therefore this contribution focuses mainly on Liberia.

In a final step, we analyse and discuss the implications of the case studies. The resulting hypotheses draw attention to flaws in the current debate whose ramifications extend beyond the case studies themselves.

# 1. State-building and state collapse: an historical overview

## 1.1 Liberia

Liberia was founded as a settlement for freed American slaves of African descent, with executive power initially vested in a Governor appointed by the American Colonization Society. Although they made up only a fraction of the Liberian population, the American-born Africans, known as "Americo-Liberians", and their descendants dominated political life from Liberia's independence in 1847 until April 1980, when Samuel Doe overthrew the government in a bloody military coup.

The coup was the result of decades of exclusion suffered by the indigenous African population of Liberia. The Doe regime was initially multiethnic and participatory in character, but during the second half of the 1980s, this gave way to a new and equally exclusive patronage system, with members of Doe's own ethnic group, the Krahn, and also the Mandingo, being recruited to key posts in government and the military. From now on, the regime's chief features were the ethnicization (and brutalization) of rule and the personalized use of the security apparatus, which was also a common trait of the previous regimes. For Liberia has never had a truly national army dedicated to defending the common good.

In 1989, a former government official, Charles Taylor, launched an armed uprising. His forces, known as the *National Patriotic Front of Liberia* (NPFL), soon seized control of 95% of the country. It was only the intervention of the military arm of the Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS) which prevented Taylor from capturing the capital Monrovia. ECOWAS negotiated a peace settlement, but the NPFL continued its military campaign, this time against a rebel movement, the *United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy* (ULIMO). The ensuing civil war claimed more than 200,000 lives and threatened to destabilize the entire West African region. Alongside the three conflict parties (government troops, NPFL and ULIMO), their various factions and local civil defence forces, the ECOWAS troops quickly became part of the local constellation of violence in Liberia as well. It was only when the *ECOWAS Monitoring Group* (ECOMOG) was established in 1996 that the civil war was brought to an – albeit temporary – end. The elections held under the peace agreement in 1997 resulted in a victory for Charles Taylor, who secured 75% of the vote, largely because he had threatened to continue the violence if he lost the election.

As President, Taylor installed an authoritarian regime which – like Doe's before it – was based on an apparatus of repression; in Taylor's case, it was recruited mainly from the NPFL. Renewed fighting quickly erupted between Taylor's government forces (*Armed Forces of Liberia*, AFL) and a rebel group, *Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy* (LURD), which was backed by Guinea. Two years after the elections, civil war broke out again. The war persisted for years, escalating in March 2003 when LURD advanced to within 10 kilometres of the capital Monrovia. At the same time, the





newly formed *Movement for Democracy in Liberia* (MODEL), backed by Côte d'Ivoire, launched an offensive from the south. The fighting claimed more than 10,000 lives. Once again, peace talks were initiated, but the fighting was only brought to a halt when ECOWAS deployed 3500 peacekeepers in August 2003. The *ECOWAS Mission in Liberia* (ECOMIL) was relieved soon afterwards by a multinational UN peacekeeping force, the *United Nations Mission in Liberia* (UNMIL), which began with a troop strength of 15,000. The presence of US Marines offshore as a rapid response force may well have exerted a deterrent effect as well and helped bring the conflict under control. As of June 2006, UNMIL has around 16,000 uniformed personnel, including 207 military observers and some 1042 police officers. The mission also employs around 500 international civilian staff and more than 700 local UN workers as well as 276 UN volunteers. In view of the significant role played by UNMIL in Liberia's political arena, some observers even claim that Liberia has become in effect a UN protectorate.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.2 Sierra Leone

Founded in 1787, also as a settlement for freed slaves, Sierra Leone later became a British Crown Colony and achieved independence in 1961. Since then, six general elections have taken place – and five military coups. Here too, the descendants of former slaves (Creoles or Krios) formed the elite. After independence, however, the animosity between the "native" population and the Krios was soon over-

laid by political rivalries between various ethnic groups.

The violent seizure of power by the *All People's Congress* led by Siaka Stevens in 1968 marked the start of a series of military coups. Stevens' self-proclaimed successor, Major-General Joseph Saidu Momoh, governed the country – which was plagued by economic crises and political unrest – until he was ousted in 1992, one year after the start of the war against a rebel insurgency group under former army corporal Foday Sankoh known as the *Revolutionary United Front* (RUF), which was supported and armed by Charles Taylor. Momoh was overthrown in a military coup staged by Valentine Strasser, an army captain. He attempted to crush the rebels by re-equipping the army and forcing it to engage with rebel troops in the provinces. However, many of the poorly trained government troops deserted and defected to the RUF rebels. Their atrocities against the civilian population and involvement in the illicit diamond trade prompted Strasser to hire *Executive Outcomes*, a private military company, to supplement his own troops. The involvement of EO was successful in that it drove back the RUF, but it revealed the inadequacy of the government troops at the same time, pointing to weaknesses in the government. In 1996, Strasser was ousted by a military coup led by his former defence minister Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio. Bio swiftly handed power over to the newly elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah. Kabbah's government signed a peace accord with Sankoh's rebels later that year, but this did not end the civil war. Meanwhile, local self-help measures were proving effective in safeguarding security, albeit confined

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Wolf-Christian Paes 2005a:97.

to local level, alongside "traditional" institutions such as secret societies.

In 1997, a coalition of army officers led by Major-General Johnny Paul Koroma forced Kabbah to leave office. Kabbah was reinstated in March 1998 after the junta was ousted by the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), but the fighting continued in many parts of the country. Even a UN intervention in 1999 failed to bring about peace at first.<sup>2</sup> In May 2000, the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) appeared to be on the verge of capturing Freetown, whereupon the British Government decided in favour of military intervention. British troops were initially deployed to evacuate foreign nationals and restore order; later on, they also provided support for the *United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone* (UNAMSIL) contingents, so that in 2001, the UN troops were able to deploy peacefully in rebel-held territory. Finally, the new British-trained Sierra Leone Army began deploying in rebel-held areas. The war was officially declared over in 2002 when a Joint Declaration of End of War was signed between the RUF, the Sierra Leone Army, and the quasi-official Civil Defence Force (CDF). That same year, Kabbah and his party again won victories in the

parliamentary and presidential elections, consolidating Kabbah's position of power. The country's progress towards peace was considered so significant that the UNAMSIL troops withdrew in December 2005.

This brief historical review illustrates the following:

- In both countries, many different security/violent actors have vied for control and influence during the course of several decades.
- The national army and police were never able to establish or maintain a state monopoly on the use of force for any significant period of time.
- In the hinterland, local civil defence forces, rebel groups and secret societies have dominated the security sector. For citizens, these various actors could act as protectors but could also pose a threat.
- Actors from neighbouring countries have played a major role during periods of conflict escalation.
- Though the intentions and achievements of the intervention troops (especially ECOMOG) remain questionable, they were, nonetheless, ultimately successful in imposing a much-needed peace, largely through the use of force.



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<sup>2</sup> On 3 May 2000, some 500 UN peacekeepers from Kenya, Zambia and India were taken hostage by loyalists of Sankoh, who at the time held a position in the transitional government. The hostage-taking was a clear sign that the peace accord had effectively collapsed.





## 2. Strategies of external actors: the deceptive quest for ownership

As this brief conflict history shows, external actors have played a vital role in ending both civil wars and in stabilizing these two post-conflict countries. Both the National Transitional Government installed in Liberia after the civil war and Kabbah's elected government in Sierra Leone were initially confronted with countries in ruin. This applied especially to the security infrastructure, which had collapsed. In both countries, external actors therefore initially undertook domestic security and border control.

In the Liberian capital Monrovia, for example, UNMIL troops essentially patrol the main thoroughfares and show little if any presence in outlying areas of the city, but there is no doubt that the international peacekeepers are perceived to be the main guarantor of security.<sup>3</sup> The same applied to Sierra Leone, where UNAMSIL played an equally important role in maintaining security, law and order (ICG 2004a:18). The relative weight of individual UN Member States in the missions tends to vary: the massive presence of British troops in Sierra Leone must be regarded as much more significant than the USA's largely symbolic presence in Liberia. The desire to scale down these costly military operations fairly quickly has spurred efforts to hand over the reins sooner rather than later, with the re-

sult that intensive efforts have been made to provide training for the countries' own state security forces (the army and police).<sup>4</sup>

If local "ownership" of security policy is believed to be a prerequisite for sustainable peace, the issue of the potential role of local actors in assuring security immediately arises. In both countries, the state neither had the monopoly on the use of force before nor after the end of the civil war. Instead, under the direction and supervision of international peacekeeping forces, (transitional) governments were installed. The national security forces clearly lacked the capacity to guarantee law, order and the safety and security of citizens – indeed, in the case of Liberia, they were dissolved altogether, while in Sierra Leone, a radical overhaul of the country's armed forces has taken place.

Besides these actors, there are remnants of the rebel groups – some more organized than others – which are not supposed to play any further role in the post-conflict order but which nonetheless harbour significant conflict potential. In addition, there are the various private security companies and civil defence forces. The role of this latter group in ensuring the immediate safety and security of citizens is by no means insignificant (see below). However, UN missions

<sup>3</sup> This was the finding of a survey and further in-depth discussions with Liberians and local experts (see below). The survey was undertaken within the framework of the project "Legitimate Oligopolies of Violence in Post-conflict Societies with particular focus on Liberia and Sierra Leone", which is funded primarily by the German Foundation for Peace Research.

<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the UN provides training for the police, while other actors are involved in training the armed forces. The British are restructuring Sierra Leone's army through the International Military Advisory and Training Team (IMATT). In Liberia, the United States has hired DynCorp International, a private security company, to recruit and train the Liberian army (Kieh 2005:171; ICG 2004a:16).

focus entirely on the state, an issue that is explored below.

The new government in Liberia has played a minimal role in security issues thus far, and it will take some time for the national security forces – the army and police – to develop a sense of ownership and commitment to the common good. The real challenge is to strengthen the capacities of the government so that it can assure security after the withdrawal of UN troops. This can only be achieved through its progressive involvement in decision-making and work processes.

In Sierra Leone, this process has already advanced one stage further: in December 2005, the last contingent of UNAMSIL troops left the country. It remains to be seen whether the newly formed army and police force are capable of dealing with potential security threats.<sup>5</sup> Since December 2005, no unrest has occurred. However, from the international community's perspective, the national security forces are likely to be reliant on external support for a long time to come.

The mid-term forecasts give cause for concern. For example, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index from 2005 characterized Sierra Leone as "a defective democracy with a tendency towards authoritarianism and personalized rule" (BTI 2005b:4). This is worrying, as it suggests that the country lacks the capacity to deal with future conflicts by peaceful means.

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<sup>5</sup> The first major challenge was the extradition of Charles Taylor from Nigeria to the Special Court for Sierra Leone in Freetown on 29 March 2006. He was transferred via Liberia to Freetown, where a special force of just 250 troops was left to guard the Court. The Court immediately requested to relocate Taylor's trial from Freetown to the International Criminal Court in The Hague due to security concerns, not least because Taylor still has allies in the region.

Both countries also face economic challenges. Although the civil war has ended, Liberia remains one of the poorest countries in the world and in need of further support and assistance from international financial institutions. There is no sign of any sustained economic upturn in Liberia at present. The civil war's effect on Liberia's economy was severe; the production of raw rubber was significantly restricted and substantial investment is required to resume production in the abandoned iron ore mines.<sup>6</sup> The illicit trade in tropical timber and diamonds (either mined illegally in Liberia or smuggled from Sierra Leone) were major sources of income during the civil war and have created an increasingly criminalized economy. All this is impeding efforts to rebuild infrastructure, revive agricultural and export production, and create the conditions necessary for foreign investment (BTI 2005a). It remains to be seen whether the newly elected government can combat corruption and whether the current UN ban on Liberian timber exports can be lifted through reforms in the timber industry. Without economic prospects, youth unemployment will also remain a structural conflict factor over the long term (the estimated unemployment rate is 85%, while average annual per capita income is \$ 115).

Like Liberia, the Sierra Leonean government is plagued by rampant corruption and lack of accountability. The economic situation in Sierra Leone is essentially very similar to that of Liberia, and a detailed description can therefore be dispensed with here.

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<sup>6</sup> Mittal Steel, the world's largest steel company, emerged last year as a powerful investor for this sector.





Although it is now several years since the civil wars ended, both governments lack the capacity to govern effectively without support from external actors. Indeed, the massive influx of external funding may have weakened the motivation to deploy the countries' own capacities effectively. However, far-reaching struc-

tural change can only evolve out of leaders' and individuals' own sense of political responsibility and ownership; external actors can at best support this process. The donor community's generally good intentions may ultimately prove to be counterproductive.

### 3. Who protects us? Capacity and perceptions

As indicated above, there is currently only one actor that can assure internal security in Liberia, and that is UNMIL. As this is a key state function, the task will ultimately be handed over to the newly formed *Armed Forces of Liberia* (AFL). Another characteristic feature of this post-conflict phase is the involvement of international actors in policing, notably in the delivery of training for the *Liberia National Police* (LNP). Moreover, since the police service currently remains ill-equipped and short-staffed, the local police forces lack the capacity to provide security without external support. This gap is filled, to a certain extent and only in some districts, by civil defence forces known as *Community Watch Teams* (CWTs), which take on the responsibility of protecting their local community. In addition, citizens with the necessary financial resources can engage private security firms to protect their property and business premises.<sup>7</sup> Although the activities of these compa-

nies should not be regarded as entirely unproblematic or necessarily positive, they are nonetheless a key actor in providing security in Liberia.

The evaluation of the research that we have undertaken in Liberia to date reveals that the residents of Monrovia regard UNMIL in particular as playing a crucial role in assuring security.<sup>8</sup> When asked to specify the most important actor for their personal safety, 77.8% of respondents named UNMIL.<sup>9</sup> The second most frequently named organization was the *Liberia National Police* (18.4%), followed – by a considerable margin – by the army. Other actors were named far less frequently (less than 2% of responses). However, the fact that these are not considered the "most important" actors does not necessarily imply that they are insignificant (see below). Due to practical consideration, we limited our research to urban areas; thus these figures reflect the perceptions of Liberia's urban population. However, people who had migrated from the

<sup>7</sup> The picture is made more complicated by the fact that the UN mission hires private security services to protect its premises, and these companies sometimes employ ex-combatants on low wages. On the one hand, this creates employment opportunities for potential trouble-makers which would not be available if the mission withdrew altogether; on the other hand, it again reflects the lack of confidence in the state's own security forces.

<sup>8</sup> A total of 700 respondents from the capital Monrovia (500) and two secondary cities Tubmanburg and Buchanan (200) were interviewed. To ensure that the sample is representative, four suburbs were selected within each city. In addition, interviewers applied a randomised technique for the selection of the streets and households.

<sup>9</sup> This was an open-ended question; no multiple-choice options were offered.

hinterland also participated in our focus group discussions<sup>10</sup>, enabling us to gain some impression of conditions in the rural areas as well. The general consensus on the importance of the UN troops among participants in the discussions suggests that, in this respect at least, a clear rural-urban divide does not exist.

The fact that an external actor is named as the key guarantor of security raises a number of serious questions: How long must the UN mission remain on the ground? When and how should responsibility for national security be transferred to local security agencies? How certain can the country's citizens and donors be that the newly trained police and soldiers genuinely have the capacity and the will to fulfil their functions properly? Interviews with local and international observers reveal that it is far too early to even consider a withdrawal of the UN mission at this stage; in many experts' view, the security situation remains volatile.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the *Armed Forces of Liberia* (AFL) was regarded as an important security actor (see Table 1) highlights the "virtual" character of the state security sector – or suggests that people's perceptions are coloured by wishful thinking. The AFL was dissolved after the civil war and, at the time of questioning, was in fact non-existent. Conversely, when asked which group they felt to be the biggest threat to them personally, 1.6% of respondents named the still defunct AFL as the biggest threat. This may have been a reference to former members of the armed forces or deserters, i.e. ex-combatants, given that 70.5% of respondents regard this latter group as the biggest threat to their personal safety

These statistics are based on two open-ended questions from the survey, i.e. they were designed in such a way as to encourage the respondents to name the most important group in each case without being influenced or guided towards any particular answer.



<sup>10</sup> For details of the composition of the focus groups, see below.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews in Monrovia (November 2005 – February 2006), also with several representatives from UNMIL.

**Table 1:** Which group is the most important one for your personal safety?

Actors	Percentage
UNMIL	77.8
Liberia National Police	18.4
Armed Forces of Liberia	2.1
Ex-Combatants	0.1
Poros/Sandee	0.1
Other	1.4
None	0.1

**Table 2:** Which group do you feel is the biggest threat to you personally?

Actors	Percentage
Ex-Combatants	70.5
Street Boys	9.3
Criminals (armed robbers)	4.4
Liberia National Police	2.4
Political Party Militias	2.2
Armed Forces of Liberia	1.6
UNMIL	1.0
Poros/Sandee (secret societies)	0.5
<i>Other</i>	2.7
<i>None</i>	5.4

If we had asked respondents to choose from a list of specific actors, we may have unwittingly excluded certain actors who in fact play a key role in security from the respondents' perspective.

In a second step, multiple-choice options were offered in order to test the data obtained from the open-ended questions. We found very little difference between the two sets of answers.



**Table 3:** For each of the following actors, please state whether you feel protected or threatened by them:

Actors	Is very / somewhat important for my personal security	Does not affect my personal security at all	Is a big / somewhat a threat for my personal security
UN Peacekeepers (UNMIL)	96.5	2	1.4
Liberia National Police	92.5	4.6	2.9
Armed Forces of Liberia	66.1	24.3	9.5
Vigilantes/Area Teams/ Neighborhood Watch	62.9	19.9	17.2
Private Security Companies (e.g. DynCorp Intl., Inter-Con Security)	40.7	55.4	3.9
Poros/Sandees (Secret societies)	17.9	52.6	29.5
Political Party Militias	8.3	42	49.7
Ex-Combatants (MODEL, LURD, Taylor Government)	3.4	7.1	89.5
Street Boys	0.5	7.4	92.1

"Don't know" and "no answers" are not shown in the table.

Here too, UNMIL is named as the most important actor, followed by the LNP. The same applies to the *Community Watch Teams* – termed Vigilantes/Area Teams/ Neighborhood Watch in the survey. The private security companies and the secret societies (Poros/Sandees) are both largely irrelevant to the majority of respondents, although the private security companies are

viewed in far more positive terms overall than the Poros/Sandees, which are regarded by almost 30% of respondents as a threat to their personal security. The perception that *political party militias* pose a threat ("is a big / somewhat a threat to my personal security") is obviously partly due to the elections which took place in October and November 2005.





Let's return our focus to the role of the state in assuring security: the emphasis on the national security agencies – the LNP and AFL – in the responses indicates that most urban dwellers, if left to choose, would still give preference to the state's own security forces over other informal or private security actors – but this says very little about their actual performance. A note as regards our inclusion of the AFL in the multiple-choice question is due here. Prior to the implementation of the survey, discussions with our project partners revealed that the AFL was considered as a significant security actor, hence its inclusion in our questionnaire. In our opinion, the relative importance allotted to the AFL in Table 3 is due not to previous experiences with government troops, but in fact indicates the expectations of respondents in terms of the future role to be played by this actor. Overall, the international actors are perceived to be far more important. This finding was also confirmed in the focus group discussions which we carried out in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In both countries, four focus group discussions were held, each involving 6-8 participants with a similar occupational background or social position but who did not know each other: In both countries, four focus group discussions were held, each comprising 6-8 participants. The groups were homogeneous (participants had a similar occupational background or social position) and virtual (participants did not know each other)<sup>12</sup>: 1) market women, 2) community leaders

<sup>12</sup> The composition of the focus groups was intended to reduce the risk that status-related barriers or entrenched roles would unduly influence participants' responses.

and youth, 3) health workers, and 4) teachers and students.

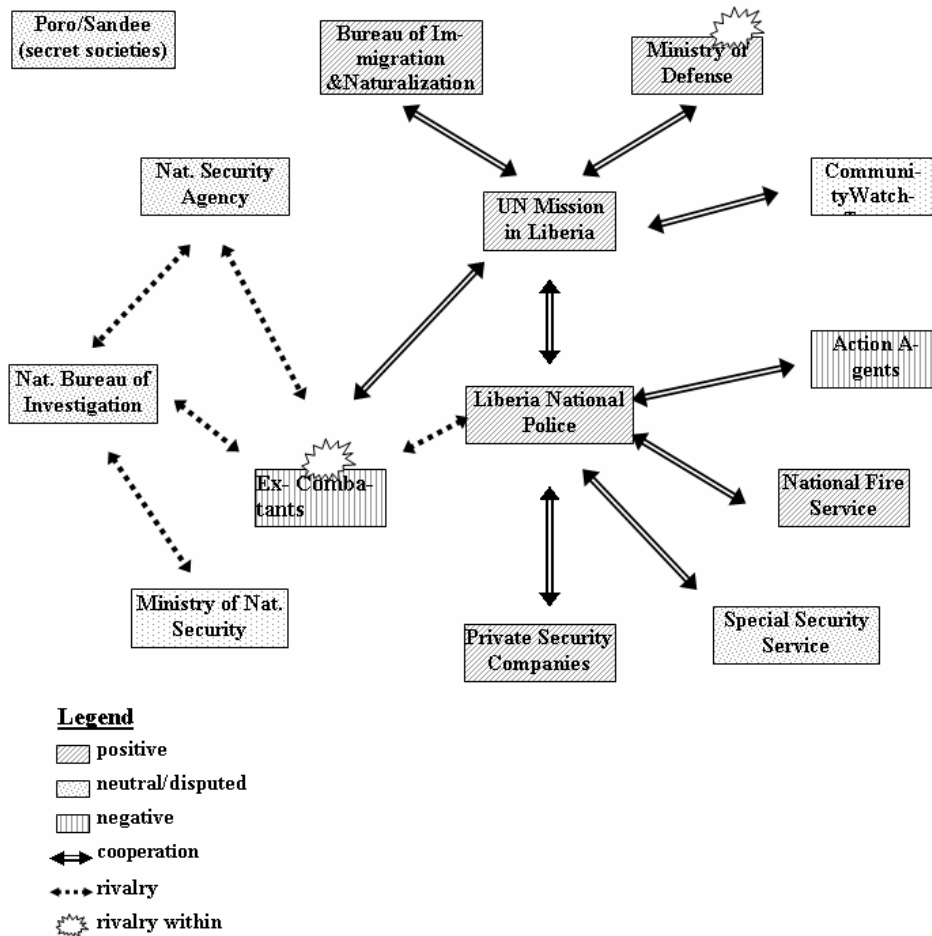
The key outcome of the focus group discussions was a graphical mapping of security actors which depicts the identity and relative significance of, and the interactions among, these various actors<sup>13</sup>. However, if other relevant actors are included in addition to the main groups which are perceived as threats or protectors, the map becomes significantly more complex.

*Figure 1* shows the interplay between, and assessment of, the various security actors in urban Liberia. Interrelationships almost always exist between the various actors, and these interrelationships can be viewed as either antagonistic or complementary. As regards the question of which actors are capable of providing security as a collective or public good, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1) *The positive role of external actors (UNMIL)*: UNMIL is regarded as a cooperation partner for both the "positive" and the "negative" actors. For example, the involvement of international actors in the field of policing is characteristic of the post-conflict phase: international actors provide tuition and training for the LNP as well as back-up for their patrols or for crowd control. However, UNMIL also works with the former rebels through its disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) programme.

<sup>13</sup> Each round of discussion lasted one day, during which time it was possible to explore the assumed motivation and legitimacy of the actors. A systematic comparison with the security situation in the past (i.e. before the civil wars ended) was undertaken in order to map the extent of the transformation in the configuration of actors.

Figure 1: Mapping security actors in urban Liberia



The diagram is based on a mapping exercise undertaken during one of the focus group discussions in Monrovia in December 2005. Using different coloured file cards and arrows, the actors were asked to depict the relations between the various security actors

2) As to whether traditional structures – especially the secret societies – can be integrated into Liberia's security architecture, the answer to this question is a resounding "no", at least in urban areas. The secret societies – the Poro and Sandee – not only play a negligible role in the urban areas, where they tend to have a negative image; but above all, they are decoupled from all the other actors. Indeed, to some extent they are viewed as a substantial threat. Admittedly, rural dwellers assign them a central role in active conflict resolution, with Poro hierarchies thus remaining significant

actors in providing institutional responses to armed violence in some communities (Sawyer 2005). However, the absence of lines of cooperation/points of contact indicates that their involvement in the development of strategies for security sector reform would very likely be problematical. This does not apply, however, to the community watch teams.

Interviews with staff from the UN mission in Liberia revealed that they attach little overall significance to local conditions and actors. Social and political mechanisms, capacities and conflicts at local level are largely ig-





nored. Since it cannot be expected of a temporarily deployed UN mission or the newly trained national police and armed forces to provide security in the medium term, security sector reform can only work effectively if local conditions are taken into account. In Sierra Leone, our focus group discussions revealed that the constellation of security actors differs, at least at first sight, from the situation in Liberia.<sup>14</sup> According to Baker (2006), the citizens of Sierra Leone turn to various security actors depending on their specific security needs. There is also a tendency to attach greater importance to traditional actors – such as secret societies – in Sierra Leone than in neighbouring Liberia, as *figure 2*<sup>15</sup> illustrates.

If we compare the maps for the two countries, we see, for example, that in Sierra Leone, the traditional structures are more integrated into the overall relationship system. While the Poro in Liberia is perceived to be a security-relevant but nonetheless decoupled actor, the secret societies in Sierra Leone (Poro, Soweï, Ojeh) have points of contact with the other actors, as has already been mentioned. They are also represented in the security apparatus, e.g. through the function of the Paramount Chief – who is usually a member of a secret society himself. Membership of these societies is widespread – not least in the police, private security companies and even among youth leaders.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to the four focus group discussions, a survey was carried out during a second project visit to Sierra Leone from April to June 2006. The analysis of the survey data was still incomplete at the time of editing this article. This being the case, the statements made above must be treated as provisional.

<sup>15</sup> The diagram is based on a mapping exercise undertaken during one of the focus group discussions in Sierra Leone in April/May 2006.

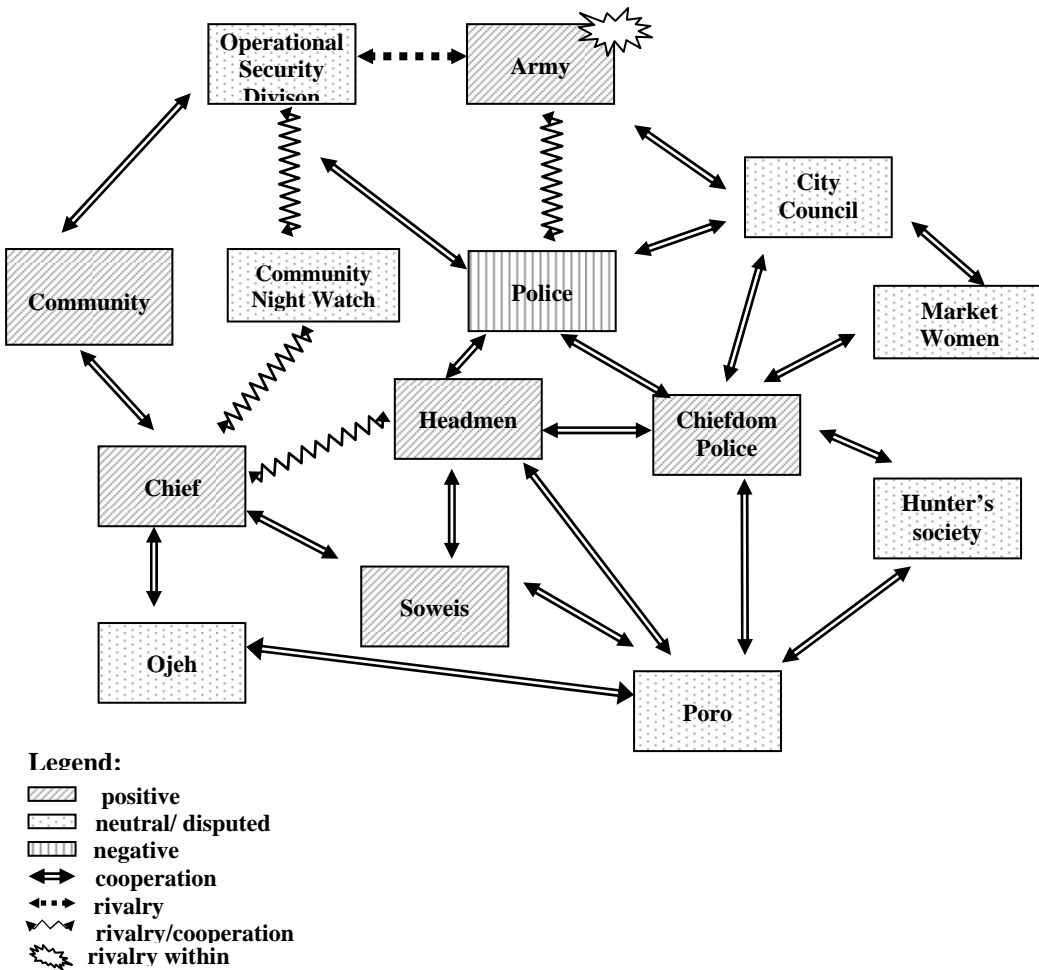
When the various maps depicting the security actors in Sierra Leone over the last five years were compared<sup>16</sup>, it was apparent that far fewer actors were involved in providing security in Sierra Leone during the involvement of UNAMSIL than since the mission's withdrawal. With the presence of UN troops, the need for security was covered. The map of the current security situation depicts far more actors. With the gradual withdrawal of the UNAMSIL troops, the emerging security gap was filled by other actors, not only the state security forces (which still lack the necessary capacities to perform this function) but also by a range of non-state actors.

Some of them have only been established recently – such as the Police Partnership Boards or the Community Night Watch, while others have "re-emerged" – such as the secret societies (Poro and Soweï). The analysis of the data from the Sierra Leone survey is not yet complete. However, the work undertaken to date indicates that here, external actors play a less significant role, especially given that the UN's peacekeeping mission (UNAMSIL) ended with the withdrawal of the final troop contingent in late December 2005. Now, it is down to the state security forces – the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) and the Sierra Leone Police (SLP) – to perform this function. These state actors remain reliant on external support. This notwithstanding, Sierra Leone's citizens have clear ideas of what they expect from a properly functioning national security apparatus.

<sup>16</sup> This comparison was undertaken using further mapping.



Figure 2: Mapping Security Actors in Urban Sierra Leone



#### 4. Conclusion: security sector reform – who should be involved?

As described in this paper, in both countries, security-relevant reform efforts have generally been steered by external actors. Citizens appear to fully endorse this process. However, current developments are far more complex. Alongside the external actors and the generally weak national security forces, many other actors have a significant bearing, in one way or another, on long-term strategies to establish security. The following core

hypotheses for security sector reform can be derived from our findings to date:

1. In the medium-term post-conflict phase, the state security forces lack the capacity to operate on a nationwide basis. They cannot prevent armed or violent assaults on the general public.
2. The political systems are not fully consolidated, and democracy





has shallow roots. Various examples bear this out: the involvement of Taylor's loyalists in Liberia's newly established institutions and Kabbah's autocratic position in Sierra Leone demonstrate that the state is still a fragile entity in both countries. This raises the question of the groups to be targeted in security sector reform.

3. To prevent any relapse into old patterns of violence, the former conflict parties, which to some extent still enjoy considerable support and legitimacy, must be integrated into the process to ensure that "ownership" is not restricted to a new elite, which currently cannot guarantee proper representativity nor performance. The exclusion of these actors could itself pose a threat to security. It is vital to shift their loyalty away from individuals and towards the democratic state, but this process is likely to be fraught with problems.

4. Local conditions (the efficiency of local civil defence forces) and "traditional" structures (secret societies) and codes of conduct should be taken into account to a greater extent if peacebuilding efforts are to be successful. Their significance, which varies from locality to locality, must be recognised in national (and regional) security strategies. The "blueprint"

approach must be abandoned and replaced by regionally differentiated strategies.

5. Urgent consideration must be given to the role of the UN missions in the existing webs of relationships among security guarantors and violent actors. Withdrawal will inevitably trigger a shift in relationships, which must be reflected more intensely in the strategies devised by external actors.

6. The people of Liberia and Sierra Leone have high expectations of a well-functioning state security apparatus, but these expectations cannot be fulfilled in the foreseeable future. A one-sided approach in which the international actors foster these countries' newly emerging state security apparatus without a) consolidating democracy and b) recognizing local self-help mechanisms is almost certainly doomed to failure.

The data from Sierra Leone, once analysed, will show whether the hypotheses developed above need to be supplemented or amended. What is already clear, however, is that in the interplay between international, state and non-state actors, the local constellations of security actors play a key role in the development of long-term stability.



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