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Armed Groups and the Politics of Legitimacy

KLAUS SCHLICHTE

International Relations, University of Bremen, Bremen, Germany

ULRICH SCHNECKENER

International Relations & Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Osnabrück, Osnabrück, Germany

This article serves as an introduction to a special section on the question of the legitimacy of non-state armed groups. Starting with a short discussion of the literature on armed groups as political actors, the authors emphasize the importance of the often-underestimated dimension of legitimacy. After having conceptualized legitimacy in more detail, the article addresses three key challenges armed groups usually face regarding the politics of legitimacy: first, they need to legitimize the use of violent means; second, for moral and material support, they depend on beliefs of legitimacy; and third, they need to simultaneously address various domestic and international audiences. Finally, the authors highlight a number of pending questions for further research on armed groups.

INTRODUCTION

For those conducting war and violence, it seems to be a truism that legitimacy matters in armed conflict. Both Mao Tse-tung's and Che Guevara's classic accounts of guerrilla warfare stressed the importance of mobilizing the support of the rebels' social environment. On the opposite side, government forces and their allies have also discovered the importance of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of populations and in the international arena when confronting rebels, terrorists, warlords or organized crime groups. The idea of 'winning hearts and minds' has been at the core of counter-insurgency strategy, from its inception in the wars of decolonization in British Malaya in the 1960s to the recent international operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq.¹ Finally, the mutual recognition of warring factions as legitimate counterparts is a key condition for any promising negotiation process or political settlement.

In academic writing on armed conflict and armed actors, however, the issue of legitimacy rarely appears. We do not attempt to develop a fully fledged theory on the politics of legitimacy of armed non-state groups in this article. In line with an earlier strand of literature,² we argue that the politics of legitimacy are central in order to

understand the activities of armed actors who want to exist in the long term, whether for personal, ideological, political or socio-economic reasons. No matter which motivation or mix of motivations initially led to the formation of an armed group, leaders, fighters and close followers are confronted with the issue of legitimacy at a very early stage. Like regular political actors, they need to explain and justify their agendas and actions; they need material and moral support from communities both inside and outside the conflict region. Without minimal legitimacy, an armed group is bound to fail in its attempts to stay in power. We argue that legitimacy is the key variable to explain such groups' political success, which is understood as the ability to gain political power and maintain such a position over a significant period of time. This implies transferring (military) control into some sort of institutionalized power. Surely, legitimacy per se does not lead to success, but a group will not be successful in terms of domination (*Herrschaft*) without developing politics of legitimacy. This is true not only for politicians and governments but also for leaders of armed groups. For the purpose of this article, the term 'armed groups' refers to organized non-state actors who are (i) willing to use and capable of using violence to pursue their political objectives; (ii) not integrated into formalized state structures, such as regular armies, presidential guards, police or special forces; and therefore (iii) possess some degree of autonomy regarding their organizational structure, agendas, armed operations, resources, infrastructures and social relationships.³

Sharpening an earlier argument⁴, armed non-state actors face three key challenges with regard to legitimacy. First, they have to find answers to the fact that the use of violence cuts both ways, it can legitimize and delegitimize actors. Second, in order to be successful, non-state actors need to rely on sources of legitimacy which should be compatible or, even better, actually reinforce each other. Due to changes in events, actors may need to overcome and extend their original sources in order to maintain or expand their power base. Third, these actors need to address different audiences and arenas at the same time, including those at the local, national and international levels. The main challenge here is to stay consistent in action and communication, as gaining support from one level should not be at the expense of legitimacy in another.

With regard to all three aspects, armed groups (and particularly their leaders) have to engage in the politics of legitimacy in a somewhat sophisticated way. As many cases show, armed actors often fail to respond to these challenges. As a result, they stay marginal, isolated or radicalized, and they may even vanish from the scene. The more prominent and successful groups and leaders seem to be able to develop social practices and political strategies which allow them to manage their needs for legitimacy. The irony, however, is that as a group or movement becomes more successful, the politics of legitimacy become more complex and demanding – and the risk of failure increases.

In order to unfold our argument, this introduction to the special section is structured as follows. First, we briefly address the debate on armed groups in the literature and relate the politics of legitimacy to key findings from the three articles following our chapter. Second, we refer to Max Weber to conceptualize legitimacy as the shared belief in the rightfulness of an armed group's agenda and activities. Third, we explore three key challenges, as described above, for the politics of legitimacy,

before ending with some concluding remarks and a discussion of the prospects for further research.

TOWARDS AN INTERPRETIVE UNDERSTANDING OF ARMED GROUPS' POLITICS

We argue, much in line with the political sociology traditions of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu, that armed groups (like regular political actors) depend on legitimate claims to turn evasive power into durable political positions. With this argument, we do not deny the role of material interest or of the economic foundations of civil warfare, but we argue that only an enlarged sociological understanding of actors' motivations, their social settings and their political surroundings can result in satisfying explanations of the dynamics of war and politics involving armed groups.

A number of studies have attempted to explain the politics of armed groups using economic language.⁵ It is then not only 'economic endowments', but also 'social endowments' that shall explain why and how groups cling together even when there is no material benefit in sight. For example, in his distinction between 'activists'/ 'investors' and 'consumers'/ 'opportunists' within rebel movements, Jeremy Weinstein developed a rational choice model based on these groups' different long- and short-term calculations.⁶ Of course, interests in material well-being play an essential role in the politics of armed groups. We would argue, however, that armed groups do much more than acquire and distribute material resources. Their actual political lives have a symbolic dimension, too, and it is here that the issue of legitimacy comes in. Too often, the symbolic dimension has been reduced to arguments about cultural differences.⁷

In a critical counter-move against rationalist reductionism, a number of scholars have hinted at the roles of belief, myth, identity, ethos, tradition and emotion in understanding civil war dynamics and the political lives of armed groups.⁸ In the field of anthropology, scholars early on stressed the importance of all forms of sources of legitimacy for armed groups, including e.g. magic beliefs, charisma of the warrior or traditional legitimacy.⁹ In political science and sociology, a growing body of literature deals with the question of how and under which circumstances armed groups are able to rule and to provide some sort of governance in a controlled territory. Authors therefore speak about 'insurgent governance', 'rebel governance' or 'warlord governance' to refer to the interplay of coercive methods, organizational capacities for governance and the quest for (local) legitimacy.¹⁰ Moreover, the degree of legitimacy is regarded as one key variable for explaining when armed groups are most likely to transform successfully into a political party or social movement after a civil war.¹¹ Our argument also fits with the more recent literature on state- and peace-building: Weberian ideas about legitimacy as the decisive element in turning mere power into political authority have been picked up here as well, and they relate directly to the understanding of armed groups' politics that we want to promote here.¹² In particular, the 'local turn' in peace-building studies highlights the neglected role of local agency and 'localized *modi vivendi*' in the formation of post-conflict political and social orders which challenge the 'liberal-international peace architecture'.¹³ As some point out, such processes often result in 'hybrid peace

governance' or 'hybrid political orders' in which also armed non-state groups play a decisive role, often based on the legitimacy they acquired during the war.¹⁴

In the most general terms, legitimacy is about making claims and the conditions under which such claims are accepted. Apart from the theoretical (or, rather, paradigmatic) struggle, whether such claims are accepted out of rational calculation or whether there is an element of quasi-religious belief in the justification (or 'righteousness') of this belief, claim-making as such points to a symbolic dimension that surrounds armed groups like any other political action. Also like other political actors, non-state armed groups make claims and perform politics of legitimacy¹⁵ – and they have to do so. In other words, armed groups are also situated in world of ideas, norms and values, and they need to develop, wage and reflect arguments in order to make and defend their claims – no matter how selfish or narrow-minded their interests might be or how much rhetoric is involved in these aspirations. Thus, we believe that the question of legitimacy is crucial to the success of political competition, even if it is not at the heart of what success actually means.

The three articles that deal with single cases in this special section show quite clearly how relevant the category of legitimacy is for understanding the violent and non-violent political dynamics that run through and surround armed groups.

Felix Gerdes's comparative analysis of the political trajectories of Charles Taylor and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf shows that international reputation and local legitimacy do not necessarily correlate. Definitions of good government might diverge between local publics and the international community, and the framing of wartime events has a huge impact on how actors are perceived. As Gerdes shows, the success of Charles Taylor in the 1997 elections cannot be explained only by voters' fear of a return to war. This legitimacy can be acquired in various ways. The fault lines in a social context create opportunities for political personnel with the right background; co-optation of local strongmen is another way of connecting with the sources of traditional legitimacy, as Gerdes shows for Charles Taylor. Furthermore, there is enough evidence to assume that Taylor enjoyed an at-times considerable charismatic legitimacy among large parts of the Liberian population. In comparison, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the current president, has had a nearly opposite trajectory. Connected to the old, long-exiled Americo-Liberian elite, she benefitted from external support but was politically unimportant in Liberia proper. Her success story thus begins with recognition abroad, which only later led to a combination of traditional patrimonial authority and democratic legitimacy.

Margit Bussmann, in her case study on one-sided violence exerted by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda, comes up with a fairly rational explanation for the temporal distribution of these practices. They are related to attacks on the LRA, which in turn retaliated by raiding villages for forced recruitment and restocking. While this explanation is highly plausible, the case is also telling with regard to the relationship between legitimacy and violence. On the one hand, the deeds of the LRA have certainly undermined its former reputation as defending a constituency. Its enemy, the government of Uganda, could easily use this internal war as a proof of the illegitimacy of the northern political opposition. On the other hand, Bussmann argues that the violence exerted rendered the LRA probably more

credible in the eyes of its supporter, the government of Sudan. Such games of recognition, like the politics of legitimization among formal governments, are another level of the politics of armed groups. This case therefore shows, in our view, how closely interlinked the different levels of legitimacy are.

Stefan Malthaner sees the legitimacy of armed actors as just one aspect of the social relationships that these actors maintain in their societal environment. Popular support can have many sources, and in his comparison of Hizbullah in Lebanon and al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya in Egypt, Malthaner shows that subcultures mattered for the first forms of legitimacy these groups could acquire. However, as Malthaner argues, this is no guarantee for acceptance and support among a wider public. Here again, utilitarian expectations also mattered as well; it became evident, though, that other social ties maintained the groups' anchorage in the constituency even when these expectations were disappointed. Furthermore, both groups are excellent examples for further study about how the legitimacy of armed actors is a function of the illegitimate violence exerted by the opponent.

From the existing literature and from the new research presented in these studies, we see enough evidence for the thesis that armed groups are also practitioners of the politics of legitimacy. Legitimacy is not static; as the cases above show, it can be built up and it can wane. Before we explore more systematically the dynamics of the politics of legitimacy, however, we need to discuss the concept of legitimacy more thoroughly.

CONCEPTUALIZING LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy, as we use the term here, refers to the belief in the rightfulness of an armed group's agenda and violent struggle. In this regard, we share the 'belief in belief' – meaning that there are bonds in social relationships that go beyond utility expectations and that are about justifications and reflexivity. We use the term here in a purely empirical understanding, ignoring all normative or legal usages. Legitimacy is the belief in the justification or the moral validity of a political organization and its activities. This belief might exist both within that organization and outside its boundaries. Legitimacy is thus a descriptive concept about normative judgements, but it is not itself a normative concept.

This understanding of legitimacy goes back to Max Weber's concept of legitimate rule, according to which a ruling group is legitimate insofar as social actors consider a given political order to be obligatory or binding.¹⁶ We do not need to discuss Weber's distinctions between the charismatic, traditional and legal-rational ideal-types of legitimate rule, as there is a broad range of literature discussing these categories.¹⁷ Nor can we enter into the debate here on the compatibility of Weber's theory of legitimacy with similar suggestions, such as Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital.¹⁸ In International Relations research, too, legitimacy became an established category¹⁹; particularly, there is an increasing interest in the dynamics of legitimacy of international institutions.²⁰

Still, rational choice theorists have a point, as empirically, how to disentangle legitimacy from other reasons of support is a very difficult question. Scepticism

seems to be even more appropriate when it comes to violent actors. On the one hand, local populations, transnational actors and neighbouring states might have very different motivations for supporting a warring faction.²¹ Their support of an armed group does not necessarily require a belief in the righteousness of the group's cause. Support can be of a purely tactical nature, motivated by the expectation of short-term benefits or given because of threats or fear.

On the other hand, legitimacy does not necessarily lead to active support. For example, under harsh constraints like a foreign occupation or escalating violence, local populations might disguise their true allegiances. Active support depends on concrete opportunities, too. Therefore, the concept of legitimacy needs to be analytically distinguished from support, which seems to be a much broader category.

Empirically, in any case, if one studies armed groups – and in particular the more successful cases – it soon becomes very clear that these actors are largely aware of the relevance of legitimacy. Pamphlets, programmes, field manuals, names, symbols, gestures and public speeches – all these practices of armed groups indicate that the issue of legitimacy plays a significant role in their political thinking and manoeuvring.

In part, this might be explained by the fact that non-state armed actors can hardly refer to legality in order to justify their actions, particularly their use of violence. A few legalized militias and paramilitary self-defence groups may be an exception to that rule, however. In the international realm, only state actors have the power to define what is legal and what is illegal. From their point of view, legitimacy should first of all be derived from legal recognition. In other words, state actors have an interest in leaving no room in between legality and legitimacy, but armed groups have to argue that there is a crucial difference between these concepts.²²

By making claims about justifications, armed actors link their struggles simultaneously to the past and to the future. On the one hand, they refer to successful or failed past struggles and popular heroes in order to build up a certain legacy and to become part of a specifically manufactured myth–symbol complex. This applies not only to the obvious cases of insurgent movements but also to militias, clan chiefs, warlords and other irregular forms of political action. On the other hand, these groups tend to promise their members and followers (and sometimes also specific communities or the population as whole) a 'better future', whatever this implies. In some cases, this future is described in concrete terms, but most often it remains a vague idea of a 'better life' and an end of certain miseries. Thereby, the 'righteousness' of these groups' actions in the present is justified by the past and by the future – or, better, by specifically constructed pasts and futures. In this way, the politics of legitimacy are important – or, as some would say, instrumental – not only for acquiring support from others but also for armed actors' self-understanding ('who we are') and placement into a wider historical perspective and sociocultural context.²³

KEY CHALLENGES FOR POLITICS OF LEGITIMACY

Legitimacy, as David Apter²⁴ has put it, is in this sense 'the key to political violence'. The politics of legitimacy are, however, far from being thoroughly researched. We

still do not know much about the practices of armed groups in their fight for legitimacy, nor have we understood why some of these attempts are successful and others are not. One way to start such a comparative analysis, as we suggest here, is to follow the needs of armed groups themselves as they experience such a struggle in their ‘group biography’.²⁵ In this section, we will explore questions related to three main challenges in armed groups’ quest for legitimacy: the use of violence, the sources of legitimacy and the addressing of different audiences.

4.1. *Legitimacy and the Use of Violence*

The relationship between legitimacy and violence is manifold. First of all, organized violence calls for justification; it needs to be legitimized. Those who are responsible for violence usually have to explain and defend their actions. These explanations might be *ex post facto* rationalizations of events, or they might be based on rather flimsy arguments. However, in most violent struggles, an overall narrative serves as the main point of reference when the use of violence needs to be justified.²⁶ Frequently used legitimizations include the defensive use of violence (in the name of a nation or for the survival of the community); protection or liberation of communities; resistance against injustices; and defence of autonomy, self-determination, pride or honour. Typically, these discourses build on connections to larger political constellations – often global ones, such as the Cold War.²⁷

Those who commit violence are oftentimes celebrated or glorified as heroes or martyrs, evoking forms of ‘charismatic legitimacy’ as Weber coined it. The hero’s actions are linked to narrations which frame the interpretation of the current struggle. In addition, armed groups also use typical patterns for justifying the use of violence internally (against their own communities): Here, leaders and spokespersons claim that they have to take action against so-called ‘traitors’, ‘defectors’ and ‘collaborators’ who are suspected of weakening the group’s coherence or of working with the enemy. Violent acts against group members are also often used for punishment and control in order to make sure that everybody follows the leaders’ commands and rules.

Despite all these common attempts to justify the use of force, the exertion of violence has a dual effect on legitimacy. The legitimizing and delegitimizing effects of violence are hard to anticipate, of which many armed groups are very much aware. On the one hand, the use of violence constitutes an act of communication vis-à-vis an enemy and a wider audience; this communication might have legitimizing effects. Violence not only is an essential defining feature of an actor but also opens new possibilities for getting attention, being recognized and gaining support.²⁸ Moreover, violence – even if it is used by the most powerless – is always a demonstration of power, which might attract others. According to the sociologist Heinrich Popitz,²⁹ violence can be regarded as ‘action power’. It involves aspects of legitimacy, as this form of power implies questions about obedience and fellowship among others. It is this ‘binding action power’ that enables armed actors to dominate the media, to set agendas, to shape communities, to escalate conflicts and to exert pressure upon their opponents. All seminal authors of sociology, including Simmel, Durkheim and

Weber, have stressed the effects of political violence on the boundaries of imagined communities.

On the other hand, it is well known that violence tends to reduce legitimacy and that it has discrediting effects, in particular when it is exerted over a longer period of time and in an indiscriminate way.³⁰ Due to escalation dynamics as well as immanent control problems within armed groups, violence tends to derail legitimacy; it may develop a logic of its own and have long-term traumatic effects on communities. Mass killings, atrocities, sexual violence, human rights abuses, bloody internal rivalries and massive counter-violence by other actors (in particular the state) all seriously undermine leaders' credibility and diminish the chances that their claims will be seen as legitimate. As the case studies in this special section show, one can often observe a downward spiral which is characterized by intensified violence and radicalization on the one hand and by a rapid process of delegitimization on the other hand. More violence leads then to less legitimacy, less legitimacy leads to even more violence and so on.

In order to avoid or to ease these effects, many armed groups have developed their own rules of engagement in order to control violence, especially towards their immediate social environment.³¹ Be it in paramilitary education, training, field manuals, code of conducts or public statements, most if not all armed groups try to establish regulations and limits on the use of violence which ought to be recognized and respected by their commanders and fighters. Sometimes these rules are underscored by sanctions and punishments. In a number of cases, armed groups have declared publicly that they would respect the Geneva Conventions of international humanitarian law and other human rights regulations – prominent examples are the military arm of the South African ANC, the Namibian SWAPO and the Palestinian PLO³². But also more recently, in spring 2011, the Libyan National Transitional Council, as the umbrella organization of that country's rebels, announced that it would follow the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war.³³ By making such claims and by developing an internal mechanism for controlling violence, these groups try to enhance their legitimacy and to draw a line between what they see as legitimate or illegitimate uses of force. Surely, this applies in particular to insurgent groups and militias and perhaps less to terrorists, warlords and criminals. However, even in those more unlikely cases, leaders usually show no interest in an unrestricted and uncontrolled use of violence since this would entail a high risk for the organization as a whole and perhaps for their own survival.

4.2. *Sources of Legitimacy*

By justifying the use of violence, armed groups use arguments and narratives which point to particular sources of legitimacy. Thereby, like other political actors, armed groups can draw on a stock of context-specific ideas, figures and symbols to construct narratives to bolster their claims. More fundamentally, they talk about such visions not only to mobilize followers and to solicit support but also to make sense of their work for themselves, to develop a particular self-image and to create a halo of importance.³⁴ However, if they want to increase their power basis, and especially if they want establish rule and order in controlled zones or territories, they need to

exploit a number of different sources of legitimacy at the same time. This aspect is certainly reinforced by the fact that, unlike for state actors, the legality as legitimacy formula is not an option for most armed groups. They have to look for other means of legitimizing their claims.

What are their options? The following overview of possible sources of legitimacy is by no means a menu of choice. Armed groups' legitimacy can only draw on a limited range of sources, and not all of them are really chosen in the sense of a deliberated decision. We know, for example, that in many armed groups, traditional belief is a working principle.³⁵ Descent from aristocratic or politically leading families is of course a source of legitimacy that gives certain personnel a comparative advantage. Other forms of internal legitimacy are related to professional experience and popular belief in the status connected to such experiences. Like civilian politicians, armed groups' leaders are apt to stage such forms of legitimacy if necessary. Examples abound, but particularly telling is the example of Abdurrashid Dostum of Afghanistan, who constructed the charisma of a brave and militarily successful leader by creating monuments, surrounding his image with pious folklore in which his generosity offered sacred protection; Dostum also used the image of the man of the people and a sumptuous home as means of creating his legitimacy.³⁶

For analytical reasons, one might distinguish between symbolic and performance-centred sources of legitimacy.³⁷ The former refer to those sources and mechanisms which are central for the justification discourses of armed groups (what they say), and the latter refer to those which are linked to the actual performance and behaviour of armed groups (what they do).

In their discourses and public statements, armed groups oftentimes use one or more of the following typical lines of argument to defend their actions and to underscore their claims. First, as stated above, the claims made are often rooted in communal myth-symbol complexes and in popular belief systems, traditions and cultures. Arguments and claims are to some extent embedded in a local sociocultural setting; however, they also represent a specific reading of this setting. In this way, these linkages between armed groups' claims and local cultures are deliberately chosen and constructed, but they cannot simply be manufactured or instrumentalized by the leadership or intellectual figures of armed groups.

Secondly, the claims can be based on the socio-economic and political aspirations of a local community, be it a clan, an ethnic group, a social class or the majority of the population. Such claims are often tied to encompassing ideologies or world views such as social-revolutionary, ethno-nationalist or religious ideas of political order. Leaders of armed actors take on these grievances and give them a voice – albeit a radical one. Thereby, they try to become representatives of those communities and their agendas; these leaders claim, rightly or wrongly, to act on the communities' behalf. In particular, smaller, radical fringe groups or terrorist movements see themselves as forerunners for the legitimate demands of an addressed audience. They claim that their actions are necessary 'wake-up calls' in order to raise consciousness and to mobilize and politicize the people.³⁸

A third source of legitimacy derives from outside threats and established enemy images. The armed group claims that it needs to liberate, protect and defend a

threatened community. By portraying the enemy, be it the state or another armed group, as particularly brutal, inhuman and evil, the armed group aims not only to create solidarity but also to present itself and its violent actions as necessary, appropriate and comparatively less destructive.

With regard to performance-centred politics of legitimacy, armed groups can also draw from various aspects. First, and probably most prominent among them, is the charisma of the successful warrior and leader, which is a central category in Weber's political sociology. In that sense, the exertion of violence itself and its communication are framed in a way that contributes to the group's charisma.

Second, another fundamental form of legitimacy might play a role in the armed groups' favour: The simple respect and credibility that leaders and fighters might earn for their readiness to sacrifice their lives for a common cause might eventually lead to latent forms of legitimacy, at least within the targeted constituency.

Third, traditional aspects of ruling which are based on aspects of personal loyalties, often in an utterly patrimonial form, deliver a degree of legitimacy which might be astonishing to outsiders. Yassir Arafat in his later years was the incumbent of such a patrimonial network. His title as 'Abu' rightly indicated his fatherly image as a patrimonial boss of a quasi-state that encompassed (even in the 1970s) several members.³⁹ Groups that reach this stage can of course also use these organizations as agencies for social control. In these cases, all forms of legitimacy that we observe in state settings are likely also at work.

Fourth, a number of armed groups might also benefit from the kind of basic services they can provide to their followers and to larger segments of the population. Giustozzi calls this mechanism 'delivery-based legitimization'; it can refer to protection, access to resources and jobs, supplies of food, water and medical care; some form of taxation; and elements of jurisdiction.⁴⁰ This is particularly so in rebel-controlled territories, but it also applies in cases of warlord figurations (e.g. in Afghanistan) or party militias (e.g. in Lebanon). Armed groups are able to perform those functions of governance, although the distribution of such services may be selective and arbitrary or based on personalized patron-client relationships. Moreover, insofar as armed groups and their leaders can act as gatekeepers to external resources and cross-border contacts, we can assume there is some legitimizing effect connected to that as well.

Fifth, and finally, the use of formal procedures (e.g. regular meetings, party congresses or internal elections) might attract those potential followers who have been disappointed by competing groups that ended up in overt patrimonialism. The growth of armed organizations might also enforce the formalization of modes of operation that in turn enhance the group's public image. The Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka,⁴¹ Hamas⁴², Fatah and Lebanon's Hezbollah⁴³ all have at times shown signs of such formalizations. Whether this is the belief in greater organizational efficiency or a tendency towards 'legal-rational' legitimacy (in the Weberian sense), what we see in these instances is still unclear.

As stated, armed groups, and prominent leaders in particular, need to combine various sources and be conscious about their conduct and use of language. Certainly, as with other political actors, inconsistencies and tensions between discourse and

performance need to be addressed. Therefore, armed groups often have certain explanations or excuses when the gap between words and actions widens. Usually, they either point to ‘unavoidable necessities’ and the hardship of the violent struggle or blame others for their counter-actions, which, for example, may disrupt the delivery of services to civilians. In many instances, they may also declare that defecting, criminal or disloyal elements among the fighters or the population are responsible for the abuses and shortcomings. In the formation period, symbolic sources are essential; in the long run, however, performance-centred sources become more and more important for armed groups who wish to keep and/or gain legitimacy. This can result in a strategic dilemma for well-established and somewhat successful armed groups. On the one hand, over time, the leadership, commanders and middle ranks are forced to deliver actions that meet expectations; on the other hand, it might be much more difficult to fulfil those demands because of limited resources and a changing conflict environment. This situation is further complicated by the fact that armed groups, in both their discourses and their actions, have to keep different audiences in mind.

4.3. Addressing Different Audiences: Legitimacy by Recognition from Outside?

Closely connected to the sources of legitimacy is the question of who is actually addressed. What is the audience for armed groups’ claims? Who should listen? There are at least three different arenas which can be distinguished:⁴⁴ (i) those segments of the population who are seen mostly as active supporters and followers, some of whom might eventually join the fighting ranks; (ii) specific local communities or a wider national audience; and (iii) the international arena, comprising of states, international organizations, transnational NGOs and the media. Clearly, the first two arenas are of utmost importance for armed groups hoping to establish themselves and to persist over time. As indicated above, most potential sources of legitimacy are directly connected to these local audiences. On the one hand, the claims made are already framed such that they reflect (to some extent) the ideas, social practices and (assumed) interests of local constituencies. On the other hand, armed groups also aim at setting their own agendas and trying to persuade local audiences to support and to obey by using both incentives and disincentives (including coercion).

However, the third arena – the international level – is just as fundamental for the ultimate success of an armed actor. While recent debates in the study of armed groups have revolved around problems of fragmentation and domestic arrangements,⁴⁵ the international politics of non-state armed actors have been very much neglected. Perhaps, it is the normative preconception that non-state actors are seen as the opposite of states – unofficial and therefore illegitimate actors in the international realm. Empirically, however, we see that armed groups have a major impact on international politics.

Most notably, through their actions and statements, armed groups also address the outside world, particularly public opinion (not least by using the opportunities of modern communication technologies) and powerful external actors. Armed groups are fully aware of the importance of this international level. Their names and programmes are designed as statements on international political norms, and most armed groups pursue external politics because they look for the support of major (or

at least regional) powers. Armed groups are keen to gain legitimacy in the eyes of external actors as well.

Beyond the question of the legal status of non-state armed groups in international humanitarian law,⁴⁶ this concerns in particular the question of receiving political recognition from outside. We understand recognition as accepting a particular practice, but first of all recognizing groups as *political* actors. In other words, external actors acknowledge (formally or informally) that an armed group is entitled by international humanitarian law or accepted as a (potential) partner for cooperation, dialogue and negotiation. In some instances, international sanctions or coercive countermeasures may constitute a *de facto* – albeit negative – form of recognizing the importance of an armed group, which in turn might increase the status of the group, at least in the eyes of its supporters. The politics of recognition concerns as well diplomatic and political decisions of governments, international organizations and international NGOs as they communicate and engage with the leaders of armed groups.⁴⁷

There is reason to believe that there are close connections between the politics of recognition and the tides of global politics.⁴⁸ During the Cold War, for example, social revolutions and anti-colonial movements echoed in the East and in the Western Left. However, the allegedly less ideological wars of today still have enormous repercussions on international politics, not least because of the difficult question of how to react to the claims of armed groups in violent struggles. For governments, this reaction might in large part be geostrategic, but it is hard to believe that all public opinion, in particular in democracies, can be reduced to such aspects. Normative and moral considerations surround wars from all sides, and the efforts of armed groups to influence such opinions might not be in vain, as their claims resonate in different national arenas in different ways. Historically, decolonization movements could count on more sympathy from the United States than from France or Britain, and demands for national self-determination found an open ear in any follower republic of former empires. There are general patterns, too: Partly, one could argue, the boom of ethnic-distinctiveness claims could be explained by the globalization of the cultural understanding of nations and the concept of the nation-state.⁴⁹ For the more recent cases like the insurgencies in Libya and Syria, the question of recognition became a pressing issue in international politics. At first glance, however, it becomes apparent that the reaction towards insurgencies does not follow clear patterns or guiding principles. The inconsistencies by which major powers dealt with the Kosovo Liberation Army and with the Taliban in Afghanistan during the late 1990s are already indicative of the murkiness of this subject, which deserves much more scholarly attention.

One might argue that politics of outside states towards armed groups elsewhere largely follows domestic agendas. If states are challenged by internal attempts of secession, they do not support such movements in other places, as was the case for the positions of the Russian and Chinese governments with regard to the sovereignty of Kosovo. However, in the more recent examples of Libya and Syria, we also see an inconsistent reaction among NATO members with similar political structures and foreign policy priorities, such as France, Great Britain and Germany. There seems to be no universal logic of recognition.

For armed groups, addressing the international level and aiming to influence outside actors is far from an easy undertaking, as getting attention and recognition from others may have ambivalent effects on domestic audiences.⁵⁰ In some ways, external recognition can reinforce legitimacy at the local level since armed groups are able to portray themselves as accepted representatives. One could assume that most armed groups are aware of this interplay between external recognition and local legitimacy and try to use it to their benefit. On the other hand, the leadership now has to live up to the expectations of both arenas, and what is required for a pleasant representation in the global media might be quite different from the normative setting and political demands domestically. Outside recognition usually goes hand in hand with some kind of moderation or, at least, with the expectation of moderation in the near future. This might in turn weaken the armed group in their own region and lead to radical competitors or breakaway fringe groups. Moreover, armed groups are cautious to rely too much on outside actors in order to not be accused of being steered by foreign powers. Therefore, as far as we can see, almost all armed groups encounter certain dilemmas when they address different audiences with very diverse agendas and values. A lot of the ambiguous appearance of armed groups and the contradictions in their representations can be explained by this fact.

CONCLUSION: OPEN RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Armed groups' politics of legitimacy should become a more prominent field of study to increase understanding and better explain these actors' actions and patterns of behaviour. A key question remains: To what extent do armed groups depend on the moral support and political legitimacy granted by local communities and other actors? In particular, we need to know more about the dynamics and challenges armed actors face with regard to legitimacy and how they respond to those challenges. In this article, we highlighted three areas confronting each armed actor: legitimizing the use of force, making use of different sources of legitimacy and addressing different audiences. Why do many groups fail to develop politics of legitimacy in this regard, but others are able to manage the politics of legitimacy in a rather sophisticated way – sometimes better than official state actors can (e.g. Hezbollah in Lebanon)?

Moreover, the study of the politics of legitimacy would establish an innovative link between international relations and comparative politics, as the local and the international arenas are of course intertwined. As stated, politics and conflict dynamics on one level will certainly have an impact on the other level. Thus, one would expect that, for example, external recognition would affect the politics of legitimacy and vice versa. However, the effects might be rather ambivalent since in many instances, the relationship between these two concepts is highly contested. Do they always reinforce each other? Does international recognition increase the opportunity for enhancing local legitimacy – or do armed groups face the dilemma of trying to satisfy too many expectations at the same time?

Further research would therefore need to specify in more detail the ways and conditions under which domestic politics of legitimacy and international recognition are mutually reinforcing. Based on such research, it would be possible to move a step

further and work on the question of what the politics of legitimacy (and recognition) tell us about the structures and mechanisms of the international system of states in general. For example, how far will state-like behaviour of armed groups be rewarded by the community of states and by international norms? How does the issue of armed groups affect debates about international norms (such as the ‘responsibility to protect’), humanitarian law, human rights issues and more general state–society relations? Nevertheless, from the theses in the studies of this special section, we would generally assume that the local and domestic politics of legitimacy still remain the most relevant levels. Experiences of post-war governments, which are recognized by important powers but lack the sufficient support of local populations, underline this view. It is a huge task to gather and systematize knowledge on these local dynamics beyond the individual cases. Based on our own research experiences, we think that theses on the politics of legitimacy cannot be deduced from a pre-established theory but rather need the analysis of empirical case-specific material, read in the light of our theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools. Only after having made some progress in this direction will we also be able to study armed groups as what they are: actors affecting and, to some extent, transforming world politics.

NOTES

1. See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare. Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International 1964, new edition 2006).
2. See David Apter, ‘Political Violence in Analytical Perspective’ in David Apter (ed.) *The Legitimization of Violence* (Houndmills: Macmillan 1997) pp.1–32; Christopher Clapham, *African Guerrillas* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP).
3. This definition does not exclude the possibility that armed groups might be founded, supported, co-opted or instrumentalized by state actors whether in an official or informal manner – as this has been occasionally the case with counter-insurgency militias, vigilantes, civil defence forces or warlords. For various types of non-state armed actors, see Ulrich Schneckener, ‘Dealing with Armed Non-State Actors in State- and Peacebuilding. Types and Strategies’, in Wolfgang Benedek, Christopher Daase and Petrus van Dyne (eds), *Transnational Terrorism, Organized Crime and Peacebuilding* (London: Palgrave 2010) pp.229–48.
4. Cf. Klaus Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence. The Politics of Armed Groups* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus/ Chicago, IL: Chicago UP 2009) pp.85–115.
5. Cf. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, ‘Greed and Grievance in Civil War’, *Oxford Economic Papers* 56/4 (2004) pp.563–95; Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2006); Cameron Thies, ‘Of Rulers, Rebels and Revenue: State Capacity, Civil War Onset and Primary Commodities’, *Journal of Peace Research* 47/3 (2010) pp.321–32.
6. Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion. The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).
7. Samuel Huntington, ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’, *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993) pp.22–49; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 1993).
8. See, for example, Clapham (note 2); Roland Marchal and Christine Messiant, ‘Les guerres civiles à l’ère de la globalization. Nouvelles réalités et nouveaux paradigmes *Critique internationale* (2003) pp.91–112; David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford: James Currey 2005); and the works of the ‘Hamburg School’ of war research e.g. Dietrich Jung, Klaus Schlichte

- and Jens Siegelberg, *Kriege in der Weltgesellschaft. Strukturgeschichtliche Erklärung kriegerischer Gewalt, 1945–2000* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag 2003); Jutta Bakonyi, Stephan Hensell and Jens Siegelberg (eds), *Gewaltordnungen bewaffneter Gruppen. Ökonomie und Herrschaft nichtstaatlicher Akteure in den Kriegen der Gegenwart* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2006).
9. Christian Geffray, *La cause des armes au Mozambique. Anthropologie d'une guerre civile* (Paris: Karthala 1990); Klaus Schlichte, *Krieg und Vergesellschaftung in Afrika* (Hamburg-Münster: Lit 1996); Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena & the Holy Spirits. War in Northern Uganda, 1985–1997* (Oxford: James Currey 1999); Ferdinand de Jong, *Modern Secrets. The power of locality in Casamance, Senegal* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2001); Thomas McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels. Everyday politics and armed separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1998).
 10. Didier Péclard and Delphine Mechoulan, *Rebel Governance and the Politics of Civil War*, Bern: Swisspeace, Working Paper 1/2015; Zachariah Chierian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers. Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud. Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst 2012); Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2014).
 11. Carrie Manning, 'Party-building on the Heels of War: El Salvador, Bosnia, Kosovo and Mozambique', *Democratization* 14/2 (2007) pp.253–72; Jeron de Zeew (ed.), *From Soldiers to Politicians: Transforming Rebel Movements After Civil War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 2008); Veronique Dudouet, *From War to Politics. Resistance/Liberation Movements in Transition* (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, Berghof Report No. 17 2009).
 12. References to Weber can be found in Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (ed.), *Statebuilding and State-Formation. The political sociology of intervention* (London: Routledge 2012) and in Nicolas Lemay-Hebert, Rethinking Weberian Approaches to State-building, in: David Chandler and Timothy Sisk (eds), *Routledge Handbook of International Statebuilding* (London: Routledge 2013) pp.3–14. Other authors draw more generally on the tradition of historical institutionalism, which is, however, replete with Weberian roots, cf. Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion. Explaining cohesion and collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 2014) and Kristin Bakke, John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toul, Michael D. Ward, 'Convincing State-Builders? Disaggregating Internal Legitimacy in Abkhazia', *International Studies Quarterly* 58/3 (2014) pp.591–607.
 13. Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver Richmond, 'The Local Turn in Peace Building: A Critical Agenda for Peace', *Third World Quarterly* 34/5 (2013) pp.763–83.
 14. Robert Belloni, 'Hybrid Peace Governance: Its Emergence and Significance', *Global Governance* 18/1 (2012) pp.21–38; Volker Boege *et al.*, 'Building Peace and Political Community in Hybrid Political Orders', *International Peacekeeping* 16/5 (2009) pp.599–615.
 15. Cf. Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities. The self-representation of rulers and subjects* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2001).
 16. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr 1988) p.470; Max Weber *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr 1985) p.16; see also Wolfgang Mommsen, *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (Oxford: Polity Press 1989), chapter 3.
 17. Randall Collins, *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1986); Stefan Breuer, "'Herrschaft" in der Soziologie Max Webers', *Studies in Cultural and Social Sciences, Vol. 8* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2011).
 18. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1977).
 19. Ian Hurd, 'Legitimacy and authority in international politics', *International Organization* 53/2 (1999) pp.379–408.
 20. Fritz W. Scharpf, *Community and Autonomy. Institutions, Policies and Legitimacy in Multilevel Europe* (Frankfurt: Campus 2010); Achim Hurrelmann, Steffen Schneider and Jens Steffek (eds), *Legitimacy in an age of global politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2007); Helmut Breitmeier, *The Legitimacy of International Regimes* (Farnham: Ashgate 2009); Anna Geis, Frank Nullmeier and Christopher Daase (eds), *Der Aufstieg der Legitimitätspolitik. Rechtfertigung und Kritik politisch-ökonomischer Ordnung* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2012).
 21. On different forms of outside support by states, diasporas, refugees or other non-state actors, see Daniel L. Byman *et al.*, *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (St. Monica: RAND 2001).
 22. On the politics of legitimacy that informal states pursue exactly for this reasons, cf. Daria Isachenko, *The Making of Informal States. Statebuilding in Northern Cyprus and Transdnestria* (Houndmills: Palgrave 2012).

23. For more details on how armed groups connect their claims with global discourses cf. Schlichte (note 4) pp.107–13.
24. Apter (note 1) p.5.
25. Elizabeth Jean Wood, 'The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks', *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008) pp.539–61.
26. Apter (note 1) p.11.
27. Schlichte (note 4) pp.107–13.
28. For an argument about 'violence as competition', see Teresa Koloma Beck and Tobias Werron, *Gewaltwettbewerbe. 'Gewalt' in globalen Konkurrenzen um Aufmerksamkeit und Legitimität*, in: Stephan Stetter (ed.), *Ordnung und Wandel in der Weltpolitik. Konturen einer Soziologie der Internationalen Beziehungen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2013) pp.239–67; Bloom, Mia, 'Palestinian Suicide Bombing: Public support, Market share, and Outbidding', *Political Science Quarterly* 119/1 (2004) pp.61–88.
29. Heinrich Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr 1992) pp.46–8.
30. Cf. Mampilly (note 10) pp.53–5; Schlichte (note 4) pp.65–76; Nelson Kasfir, 'Guerillas and Civilian Participation: The National Resistance Army in Uganda', 1981–86, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43/2 (2005) pp.271–96.s
31. Stefan Malthaner, *Mobilizing the Faithful. Militant Islamist groups and their constituencies* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus 2010).
32. Olivier Bangerter, 'Reasons why armed groups choose to respect international humanitarian law or not', *International Review of the Red Cross* 93/882 (2011) pp.353–84. For an overview of prominent cases, see, for example: A collection of codes of conduct issued by armed groups, in: *International Review of the Red Cross* 93/882 (2011) pp.483–501.
33. Cf. Koloma Beck and Werron (note 38).
34. Barker (note 10).
35. The literature on the rivalry between Kurdish factions, for example, is replete with the growing contradiction between traditional and other forms of legitimacy, cf. Edgar O'Balance, *The Kurdish Struggle, 1920–1994* (London: Tauris).
36. Cf. Giustozzi (note 10) pp.187–205.
37. For this analytical distinction of different politics of legitimacy, see Nullmeier, Geis and Daase (note 20) p.26.
38. See e.g. Bard O' Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism* (Washington: Potomac Books 2005) pp.93–114.
39. Baruch Kimmerling and Joel Migdal, *The Palestinian People. A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2003) p.265.
40. Cf. Giustozzi (note 10) pp.193–94; see also the literature on cases mentioned in notes 9 and 10.
41. Dagmar Hellman, *The Tamil Tigers. Armed Struggle for Identity* (Wiesbaden: Reiner 1994).
42. Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence and Coexistence* (New York, NY: Columbia UP 2006).
43. Malthaner (note 27).
44. Schlichte (note 4) pp.86–7. See also Klaus Schlichte and Alex Veit, 'Gewalt und Erzählung. Zur Legitimierung bewaffneter Gruppen', in Sabina Ferhadbegovic and Brigitte Weifen (eds), *Bürgerkriege erzählen. Zum Verlauf unziviler Konflikte* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press) pp.153–76.
45. Kristin Bakke, Kathleen G. Cunningham and Lee Seymor, 'A Plague of Initials. Fragmentation, Cohesion and In-fighting in Civil Wars', *Perspectives on Politics* 10/2 (2012) pp.265–84; Paul Staniland, 'States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders', *Perspectives on Politics* 10/2 (2012) pp.243–64.
46. Math Noortman, 'Aufständische Gruppen und private Militärunternehmen – theoretische und praktische Überlegungen zur Position bewaffneter nicht-staatlicher Akteure im humanitären Völkerrecht', in Hans-Joachim Heintze and Knut Ipsen (eds) *Heutige bewaffnete Konflikte als Herausforderungen an das humanitäre Völkerrecht* (Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer 2011) pp.187–99; Zakaria Daboné, 'International law: Armed Groups in a State-centric System', *International Review of the Red Cross* 93/882 (2011) pp.395–424; Jann K. Kleffner, 'The Applicability of International Humanitarian Law to Organized Armed Groups', *International Review of the Red Cross* 93/882 (2011) pp.443–61.
47. Claudia Hofmann and Ulrich Schneckener, 'How to Engage Armed Groups. Reviewing Options and Strategies for Third Parties', *Sicherheit + Frieden* 29/4 (2011) pp.254–59.
48. Schlichte (note4) pp.107–12.
49. Elika M'bokolo and Jean-Loup Amselle (eds), *Au cœur de l'éthnie. Ethnies, tribalisme et Etat en Afrique* (Paris: La Découverte 2005).
50. Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out. States and revolutionary movements, 1945–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).