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The Legitimacy Battlefield

How Armed Groups Leverage Violence and Values in the Quest for International Recognition

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Abstract

How armed groups legitimise themselves on the international stage is a critical question given the considerable influence they wield in global politics. Yet, it has seldom been systematically investigated. By addressing this question, this thesis fills a gap on the empirical understanding and theorisation of the rebels' international legitimacy politics. This lacuna persists at the intersection of International Relations (IR), legitimacy theory, and conflict research. The study challenges the marginalisation of armed groups in legitimacy research in IR and exposes the limitations of classical legitimacy theory in contexts of political disorder where armed groups are the agents seeking legitimacy. The study also critiques traditional IR and conflict research perspectives in which rebels' foreign politics is often viewed from a state-centric lens or compartmentalised. While emerging debates in conflict research have paid attention to rebel legitimacy beyond the domestic terrain, these debates have fallen short of advancing a holistic understanding of the matter. The thesis, by contrast, eschews the outside-in analysis of armed groups as it develops a heuristic framework—integrating armed action, identity projection, and communication strategies—to unravel the intricacies of their legitimacy. Through a comparative case study of the key conflict players, the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) and the Afghan Taliban, utilising in-depth interviews and textual analysis of primary sources, this thesis yields four key insights. First, moving beyond the classical dyadic (two-actor) conceptualisation of legitimacy relations, rebel legitimacy is best understood as a triadic (three-actor) dynamic. Second, regional support serves as a stepping stone for international recognition. Third, although violence is a double-edged sword, it remains armed groups' primary repertoire for contesting legitimacy. Fourth, rebels with values and identities deviating from Western norms face additional hurdles in their quest for international integration. Finally, the thesis' emphasis on armed groups as agents co-shaping international relations, reveals two promising future research avenues. One of them is how armed groups influence inter-state relations. The other is how rebels act simultaneously as disruptors and reproducers of established power and normative configurations in international order. Exploring these avenues holds the potential for opening up new ways for understanding international relations and interrogating mainstream IR theorisation.

List of Research Papers Included in the Dissertation

Elsayed, Ahmed. 2023. 'From the Mountains to the Élysée: The Precarious International Legitimacy of the Syrian Kurdish YPG and PYD'. *The Middle East Journal* 77 (1): 53–77.

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Elsayed, Ahmed. 2024. 'Beliefs and International Legitimacy: The Janus Face of the Taliban's Political Worldview and Value Rationality'. Unpublished manuscript (submitted to *Politics, Religion & Ideology* on 20 February 2024 and currently under review).

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Part One: Introductory Chapter

The Legitimacy Battlefield

How Armed Groups Leverage Violence and Values in the Quest for International Recognition

1. Introduction

This thesis investigates the quest for international legitimacy by non-state armed groups. These groups are key participants in global politics and intra-state wars, the most common form of armed conflict since 1945 (Sarkees and Wayman 2010).[1] While often portrayed as criminal gangs or war profiteers, compelling evidence demonstrates that many armed groups strive for external legitimacy, aiming for their political aspirations to be recognised as rightful, justifiable, or worthy of support. This is clearly not a recent development. Multiple contemporary governments are extensions or descendants of what started out as rebel or national liberation movements.[2] Yet, despite the long history of the phenomenon, most studies of armed groups' foreign relations focus on either their diplomatic efforts or their role in inter-state power struggles. A comprehensive analysis that considers both violent and non-violent strategies rebels use to gain international recognition is lacking.

Before elaborating on the research question and basic propositions, a recent and relevant example from Palestine is presented. This example serves as a starting point for this investigation, illustrating the efforts of armed groups to manage their external image and to shape how others perceive them. It also highlights the impact of rebels on world politics and inter-state relations.

On 21 January 2024, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) issued a 16-page English report, entitled "Our Narrative," to contextualise and justify its surprising armed attack against Israeli military bases and Kibbutzim surrounding Gaza on 7 October 2023 (*Hamas Media Office* 2024). The main purpose of the report was to discredit "the Israeli official narrative [that] had always sought to demonize the Palestinian resistance" (ibid., 8). In this communiqué, Hamas described the operation it calls al-Aqsa Flood as "a necessary step" and "a defensive act in the frame of getting rid of the Israeli occupation" (ibid., 6). The group, which self-identifies as an "Islamic national liberation and resistance movement" (ibid., 13) denied that its fighters engaged

[1] Pettersson and Eck (2018, 535) reported that forty-nine countries experienced an internal conflict between the state and, at least, an armed group in 2017.

[2] South Africa, Algeria, and Kosovo are just examples.

in raping women, beheading children, or indiscriminate targeting of innocents during the attack.[3] Pushing against its Western designation and media depictions as terrorist,[4] barbaric, and anti-Semitic, the group reiterated that on 7 October its forces were "fully disciplined" and "were keen to avoid harming civilians" (ibid, 7). Hamas also stressed that "its conflict is with the Zionist project not the Jews" and that "resisting the occupation with all means including armed resistance is a legitimized right by all norms, divine religions, [and] the international laws" (ibid., 14).

Taking a broader look beyond the narrative and propaganda battles, what the Palestinian militants ushered in after they broke through security fences around Gaza on 7 October quickly evolved into regional and international upheavals. The manifestations are manifold. In a swift and "powerful symbol" of support to Israel (Aboulenein 2024), Washington deployed the US Navy's largest aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean to deter hostile forces. This was followed by US and UK airstrikes against the Houthis (Ansar Allah) in Yemen, after the latter, in solidarity with Gaza, had attacked commercial vessels in the Red Sea that they said were linked to Israel. Concurrently, Israel-Lebanon border clashes intensified as Hezbollah and the Israeli army engaged each other, while disparate armed groups in Iraq and Syria attempted to target US forces stationed in these countries with drone and rocket attacks.[5]

By April 2024, while the centre of armed clashes expanded in the Middle East, a political confrontation was escalating between leading powers in the Global North, such as the US and Germany, and several countries in the Global South, including Brazil and South Africa. Whereas the "unparalleled and unprecedented" civilian death and destruction in Gaza (*UN* 2023) prompted the world's governments to overwhelmingly demand a humanitarian ceasefire in the Strip (*UN News* 2023), the US continued to disregard the global consensus and shield Israel from its international obligations. The tension between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine blocs peaked with South Africa's accusation of Israel of breaching the Genocide Convention at the International

[3] In March 2024, the UN reported "reasonable grounds to believe that conflict-related sexual violence — including rape and gang-rape — occurred across multiple locations of Israel and the Gaza periphery during the attacks on 7 October 2023" (*UN* 2024). According to the report, the international organisation urged the Israeli government to grant access to the UN fact-finding mission "to fully investigate all alleged violations". However, the Israeli Ministry of Health prohibited its doctors from cooperating with the mission, "citing [the latter's] perceived anti-Israel stance" (Ghert-Zand 2024); according to the forensic analysis conducted by the Investigative Unit of *Al Jazeera English* (2024), the story of beheaded babies remains unfounded. While rape seems to have occurred in individual cases, there was reportedly no evidence that "it was wide-spread and systematic" (ibid., [50:13]).

[4] Hamas is listed as a terrorist organisation in many countries including the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as in the European Union.

[5] In April 2024, Israel bombed an Iranian consulate in Damascus. Iran retaliated with drone and missile attacks on Israel.

Court of Justice (ICJ). For some analysts, it was not just a trial of the Israeli war on Gaza, but of "the whole post-second world war rules-based order" (Wintour 2024).

In a nutshell, as the 7 October attack triggered a turmoil in international relations, Hamas sought to gain external sympathy and support for itself and its cause. Accordingly, this case vividly reflects two basic propositions that guide this research and sets the stage for its central inquiry into how non-state armed groups' politics of international legitimacy unfold. Specifically, *how do rebel groups legitimise themselves on the global stage? In which ways may the rebels' legitimation efforts contribute to their recognition as formal actors in international politics?*

The first proposition of the thesis is that armed groups, in and of themselves, are agents of international politics. Beyond their central role in civil wars, which often have far-reaching international repercussions, armed groups are also active participants in broader geopolitical landscapes. This participation takes multiple forms, such as embedding themselves in regional cleavages and security arrangements, connecting with supportive trans-national networks, and interacting with powerful external states and organisations.

Most research in International Relations (IR), particularly within the realist and liberal schools of thought, tends to downplay the agency of armed groups, relegating them to a subordinate position in analysis compared to states. This is exemplified by the persistent portrayal of armed groups in internal conflicts as simply proxies for external states. In his essay on counterinsurgency, Eqbal Ahmad (2006 [1971], 50) noted "the conspiratorial theory …, held with particular tenacity" by counterinsurgents, that any insurgent group "is inspired, directed, and controlled from abroad." Ahmad argued that the "insistence upon viewing [rebellions] in conspiratorial terms … permits a grossly distorted interpretation" of rebel politics (ibid.). Such framing essentially diminishes the agency of rebel groups, reducing them to mere objects (pawns or surrogates) deployed to achieve the strategic goals of a third-party state. While some thorough analyses and respected studies present armed groups in this objectified way, it is the officials and supporters of the state opposing these groups who most ardently promote and cling to this view. This characterisation serves several purposes, including damaging the reputation of both the rebels and the state they are linked to. For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that many Moroccans perceive the Polisario Front as an Algerian puppet.[6]

While this dissertation acknowledges the merits and limitations of the "proxy" lens in analysing armed group-state interactions, it cautions against an overreliance on what can be termed

[6] The Western Sahara conflict centres on the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi movement advocating for self-determination, which contests Morocco's claim of sovereignty over the territory. Algeria has emerged as a key external backer of the Polisario Front in this contest.

proxyism (see Mumford 2013; Wither 2020). This refers to the exclusive use of this lens, neglecting other complementary analytical perspectives, and consequently downplaying the capacity for independent action of armed groups. States' interests and motivations are undoubtedly crucial for understanding their relationships with rebel groups. However, an overemphasis on state-centred calculations often leads to reductionist explanations of such relationships. Although necessary, these explanations are insufficient to fully account for the complexities of state-rebel partnerships and the conflicts they are involved in. This limitation is further highlighted by the tendency of proxyism to assume state interests are fixed and understate the role of normative considerations in alliance formation.

To address this one-sided view, recognising the political agency of armed groups is crucial. Rebels are not passive bystanders as inter-state rivalries and international currents shift to reward or harm them. While typically disadvantaged in firepower and stature compared to state opponents, armed groups are not powerless. As Schlichte and Schneckener (2015, 415) argue, "violence – even if it is used by the most powerless – is always a demonstration of power".[7] Indeed, by adapting their violent and non-violent strategies, seizing political opportunities, inserting themselves into states' strategic and ideological divides, and aligning themselves with the objectives and values of powerful actors, armed groups can co-shape their own political destinies as well as those of their state adversaries.

The second proposition of the thesis is that armed groups seeking a share or control of state power actively pursue international support and recognition. Initially, these groups often face condemnation as violent disruptors of (inter-)national peace and security. To counter these portrayals, they strive to justify their existence and aspirations to both domestic and international audiences. The very emergence of rebels often signifies a crisis in the government's authority. Therefore, in their early stages, these non-state challengers primarily base their legitimacy on perceived failures, injustices, or inadequacies of the existing regime, rather than on their own qualifications or proposed solutions. Perhaps the emphasis on lived reality resonates more strongly with many potential supporters than an articulated vision of an uncertain future.

However, this does not imply a hierarchical or chronological order between the de-legitimation of the enemy and the legitimation of oneself. Both are crucial and intertwined aspects of any political actor's legitimacy struggle, whether it is a state, a rebel group, or an international institution. Nevertheless, for armed groups, de-legitimising the existing power is more central.

[7] The historical record has numerous events where armed groups have seriously challenged the military might and undermined the security of even the most formidable states. The wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan (since 1979), and the attacks of 11 September are examples.

People rarely resort to armed rebellion over economic hardships like inflation or unequal pay. Justification for such drastic action hinges on a deeper sense of injustice—a belief by the rebels that the government has inflicted severe harm on their fundamental rights, dignity, identity, or cultural values. As Francis Fukuyama (2018, Ch. 1) puts it, "[a] humiliated group seeking restitution of its dignity carries far more emotional weight than people simply pursuing their economic advantage."[8]

This dissertation posits that armed groups start out as counter-claimants to legitimacy,[9] embarking on a precarious journey from banishment and illegality to eventual acceptance and recognition as formal power holders. Undermining the state enemy alone is not enough to achieve this goal. Therefore, armed groups actively shape the perceptions of others through self-legitimation strategies targeted at their own members, local communities, and international actors. Examples include portraying themselves as credible political actors, responsible administrators, trusted negotiators, or rightful representatives of their people's grievances and aspirations. Additionally, to counter the de-legitimising effects of their violence, armed groups often claim their armed action is defensive, targeted, and deployed by disciplined forces.

While domestic support is undeniably crucial for armed groups' survival and longevity, it is insufficient to determine their international fortunes. Securing international legitimacy is vital for formalising and normalising their political status on the global stage. Without recognition from a significant number of states, especially major powers, armed groups "inhabit a different, more violent and precarious world than system members do" (Coggins 2011, 448). This is particularly true for de facto states, like Somaliland, Western Sahara, and Kosovo. In these entities, born from conflict and secession, armed actors evolved into governments with functional political structures. Yet, the absence of widespread recognition for their statehood claims denies them the legal rights and privileges accorded to established members of the international society.[10] In the state system, to borrow Hannah Arendt's (1973, 298) words, rebels lack "the right to have rights".

Martin Wight (1972, 1) defines international legitimacy as "the collective judgment of international society about rightful membership of the family of nations". Armed groups seeking acceptance as legitimate members in this society must therefore align with the prevailing discourses, principles, and rules associated with "good citizenship" in it (Jo 2015, 65). In the West-

[8] See also Schlichte and Schneckener (2015, 411) highlighting the significance of symbolism, identities, and emotions in understanding the emergence and development of rebel groups.
[9] The legitimacy of a government undermines the claims of those who seek to overthrow it (Barker 2001, 99).
[10] An example is Somaliland's agreement on 1 January 2024 granting landlocked Ethiopia access to the Red Sea port of Berbera. Swiftly, the president of Somalia, asserting that Somaliland is an integral region of his country, signed a law "nullifying" the Somaliland-Ethiopia port deal (Sheikh 2024).

dominated global order, this often translates to embracing the norms of secularism, democracy, human rights, and international law (see Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018, 109; Charlesworth and Coicaud 2010, 61). Rebel leaders strategically utilise contemporary political language, communication tools, and diplomatic channels to present themselves as trustworthy politicians, even future statespersons, who champion these values.

Still, rebels understand that, while diplomatic efforts and normative stances can be impactful, Mao Tse-tung's (1965, 224) adage—"Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun"—holds true. This highlights the importance of military strength in influencing state support and recognition decisions, which are often driven by future expectations and strategic calculations (Huang 2016, 90). Therefore, armed groups must demonstrate battlefield competence and resilience, proving their vital role in the conflict and its potential resolution. Often overlooked, *fighting morale* plays a crucial role in this regard. Without military relevance, an armed group's legitimacy journey is likely to remain grounded. In other words, even if not the strongest force, insurgents have to find ways to establish themselves as an *unignorable* party to the conflict for their international goals to be feasible.

In essence, armed groups strive to convince foreign actors that their rebellion is justified, legitimate, and ultimately beneficial. This can be achieved through a combination of military resilience, diplomatic and media engagement, and a professed commitment to universal values like justice and human rights. Seeking leadership roles in existing or future states, rebels desperately need international recognition during, and in many cases after, their fight against the opposing government. While a multitude of factors influence whether armed groups achieve external recognition, including the strength of their adversary and the specific context (temporal and spatial) of their struggle, this research focuses on a central element: the legitimation politics of these groups. After all, international recognition is neither readily available nor freely granted; it must be actively pursued, which is precisely what most rebels attempt to do.

This dissertation seeks to advance the understanding of armed groups and their foreign relations by constructing an analytical frame for navigating the complex terrain of these groups' international legitimacy. Moving beyond the classical dyadic (two-actor) model of legitimacy relations involving a claimant and a grantor, the research argues that a *triadic* (three-actor) conceptualisation of these relations proves more useful when studying rebel legitimacy. The tripartite conception underscores the agency of the armed group, placing it on equal (theoretical) footing with its state opponent as they both interact with international powers. The research also finds that *regional* standing often prefigures international legitimacy. Armed groups that lack legitimacy in their immediate neighbourhood are less likely to travel far in their international

journey. Furthermore, while armed action may be a double-edged sword in the fight for positive self-representation abroad, it remains the primary tool for rebels contesting power and legitimacy. Lastly, rebels championing ideologies or identities that diverge from Western values, such as secularism and democracy, face a steeper path to legitimacy.

The remainder of this section serves as a roadmap for the dissertation. The thesis itself has two main parts. The first part is the introductory chapter, encompassing the current section and extending to the "Conclusion" section. The second part is a compilation of the three research papers that constitute the core of this study.

The subsequent sections of this introductory chapter are organised as follows. First, "Study Purpose" clarifies the central research question and objectives. Second, "Definitions and Scope" explains key terms and concepts used throughout the thesis to ensure a clear understanding of them. Third, "Literature Review" delves into existing scholarship relevant to the study, focusing on three primary areas: legitimacy theory, legitimacy in international relations, and armed groups in civil wars. This section integrates these areas to provide a comprehensive foundation for the research. Following this, "Methodology" explores the theoretical framework guiding the research approach and details the research design, data collection, and analysis methods. It also discusses any limitations encountered and the steps taken to mitigate them. Fifth, "Overview of the Dissertation's Research Papers" provides summaries of the three academic papers included in the thesis. These papers focus on two case studies: the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) and the Afghan Taliban.[11] This section also discusses how these papers connect to each other. Finally, "Conclusion" synthesises the theoretical and empirical contributions of the thesis. It also critically reflects on the research process and proposes avenues for further investigation.

2. Study Purpose

Armed groups wield considerable influence in international affairs (Vinci 2008, 1). Yet, a critical gap remains in understanding how they navigate the path to international recognition. For legitimacy-seeking rebels, transforming from outlaws to recognised political entities on the global stage is a formidable challenge. This exceptional trajectory, however, warrants a deeper investigation than what the extant literature offers. Therefore, in addressing this lacuna in the study of rebel legitimacy, this thesis aims to make an original contribution to both conflict studies and international relations.

Conflict research has long focused on rebel motivations, warfare strategies, governance, internal structures, and local support (see Collier 2000; Davis 2016; Little 1984; Keen 2000; McColl

[11] YPG comes from the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*.

1969; Schneckener 2009). In contrast, recent decades have seen a growing interest in armed groups' foreign affairs, including their pursuit of international support and legitimacy (see Biene and Daase 2015; Duyvesteyn 2017; Huang 2016; Podder 2017; Schlichte 2009; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015). Despite its valuable insights, the recent scholarship on armed groups has yet to develop a systematic framework for mapping rebels' legitimation politics. Failing to unravel the intricacies of legitimacy dynamics within civil wars and state-rebel relations hinders the grasp of crucial avenues armed actors can exploit to challenge their state counterparts beyond the battlefield.

International activism is a key arena where non-violent confrontations between states and armed groups take place. Emerging scholarship provides a nuanced examination of rebel diplomacy and public relations. However, a comprehensive understanding of the broader processes—of which diplomacy is merely one component—remains elusive. A singular focus on diplomacy fails to explain why armed groups with limited foreign affairs capabilities, like the Taliban, can achieve a stronger international position than those with superior diplomatic infrastructure, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Therefore, this study seeks to broaden the perspective, examining diplomacy as one thread within the diverse tapestry of strategies employed by armed groups in their pursuit of international standing and recognition.

In international studies, dominant realist and liberal theories (as previously discussed) often relegate armed groups to the periphery of international actors. These theories analyse global affairs through the lens of nation-states and governance institutions. Consequently, armed groups are often viewed as either extensions of state power or disruptive forces to the mechanisms upholding global peace and security. Furthermore, discussions of legitimacy in IR have largely marginalised rebels. Although an evolving debate on the multifaceted nature of legitimacy of international governance institutions has emerged in recent years, other non-state actors, particularly armed groups, remain largely absent from this debate.

This study goes beyond simply incorporating armed groups as actors in IR legitimacy research. By examining how rebels pursue legitimacy, the study reveals how their identities and strategic considerations shape their interactions with international players. These interactions, in turn, can challenge or reinforce existing international norms and power dynamics. Armed groups thus become active participants in shaping international politics, even as they are shaped by it. In short, including rebels and their legitimacy struggles in IR scholarship deepens the understanding of evolving complexities of international relations.

In conclusion, this dissertation seeks to establish a heuristic framework that serves as a theoretical and conceptual roadmap for scholars navigating the intricacies of armed groups' pursuit

of international legitimacy. To develop this framework, a critical engagement with classical legitimacy theory will be undertaken.[12]

3. Definitions and Scope

To ensure clarity and establish the study's boundaries, this section defines key terms and concepts used throughout the dissertation. Distinguishing essential matters from those that are relevant but not central to the research question is important to maintain the focus of the study. Terms like "armed groups," "legitimacy," "legitimation," and "recognition" are prone to misinterpretation and politicisation. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify how this study interprets them and the rationale behind these interpretations, while conceding that "any definition will be missing some aspects of the concept's meaning in our life" (Mulligan 2006, 353).

3.1. Armed Groups

Armed groups are defined here as organised political entities that engage in purposeful violence during civil wars to achieve political objectives while maintaining a significant degree of autonomy from state control. These actors are often subject to conflicting labels—terrorists, criminals, outlaws, warriors, freedom fighters, and revolutionaries—depending on the observer's perspective.[13] Such labels are politically and normatively loaded, reflecting underlying loyalties and agendas. Even newer terms like 'violent extremists' are not less contentious (Dudouet 2021, 240). Consequently, this dissertation deliberately adopts "armed groups" as an umbrella term for the studied entities. This choice, alongside related terms like "rebels" or "insurgents," is considered less politically charged and conceptually problematic compared to available alternatives.

While this dissertation retains the term "non-state" to describe armed groups, it rejects the implicit "reference to the state as a touchstone for deliberation on legitimacy" (Duyvesteyn 2017, 670) or a standard for defining and valuing other political actors. In both popular and academic discourse, armed groups are often treated as 'the other'—to be controlled, repressed, engaged with, or supported. However, drawing on Max Weber's interpretive sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*), this research avoids value judgments or prescribing how states or organisations should approach them. The focus here is on understanding the motivations of these actors and their subjective meanings,

[12] Legitimacy theory has been traditionally associated with nation-states. In recent years, however, it has gained traction in analysing international governance institutions and their authorities.

[13] Imperial, colonial, apartheid, and occupying powers have historically labelled resistance movements seeking national liberation as terrorists. This tactic de-legitimises the insurgency and generates support for suppressing it. For example, in the 1980s, the US government, under President Ronald Reagan, labelled the Nicaraguan Contras as 'freedom fighters' while designating the anti-apartheid African National Congress (ANC) as 'terrorists'. This highlights the subjectivity of such labels and the political agendas behind them.

representations, and identities in their pursuit of legitimacy. Put differently, this dissertation eschews the traditional outside-in perspective on armed groups. Instead, it aims to understand (*verstehen*) these actors from their own vantage point as they interact with the state-centric world.

Unlike established non-state actors, like international institutions or NGOs, whose "non-state" status is permanent and reflects their core functions, armed groups with relevance to this study actively seek to shed their "non-state" label.[14] Their primary goal is not dismantling the state, but rather capturing or restructuring it. The inherent aspiration to transition to the "state" category differentiates armed groups from other non-state actors who by default lack such ambition. Despite high failure rates, several armed groups have demonstrably transitioned into governing authorities. Examples include Algeria's National Liberation Front (FLN) in the 1960s, South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) in 1990s, Uganda's National Resistance Army (NRA) in the late 1980s, and Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front (SNLF) in the 1970s. These cases highlight the dynamic nature of the "non-state" label for armed groups, which can be a stepping stone rather than a permanent categorisation. Existing literature highlights this point. For example, Sukanya Podder (2017, 692) argues that rebels pursuing international support and recognition strive to "look and behave like 'would be' states."

Armed groups exhibit significant diversity in ideology, organisation, goals, and use of violence. However, certain scholarly accounts often over-emphasise the latter. These accounts tend to pathologise rebel violence even as they downplay potentially more destructive state violence. While armed groups' belligerent actions have undeniable consequences, these actions are just one facet in their broader repertoires of armed and civilian contentious politics. Neglecting rebels' non-violent domestic and international activities, along with the social and political contexts in which they operate, risks *essentialising* rebel politics and producing simplistic and reductionist scholarship. A nuanced and self-reflective approach is thus essential to understanding the complexities of armed conflict and its actors.

3.2. Legitimacy, Recognition, and Legitimation

This study argues that for a nuanced understanding of armed groups' legitimacy politics, a clear distinction between "legitimacy," "recognition," and "legitimation" is valuable.[15] While often used interchangeably in academic literature and media, this conceptual differentiation holds significant semantic and pragmatic utility. Semantically, it allows researchers to precisely identify and utilise

[14] Klaus Schlichte (2009, 33) argues that "states are deeply involved in the emergence and logic of armed groups."
[15] This is an analytical proposition. In reality these notions are inseparable.

the varied meanings and conceptual proxies each term has acquired over time and across disciplines. Classically, legitimacy denotes the right to rule and be obeyed, signifying the normative justification (or morality) of authority. However, this research expands this understanding. It builds upon Max Weber's (1978) theory of *domination* while incorporating Pierre Bourdieu's (1987) concept of *symbolic capital* and David Easton's (1975) notion of *diffuse support*.

Practically, this set of concepts is key to map the complex web of processes and relationships involving rebels, the state they oppose, and domestic and international audiences. By functioning as distinct analytical nodes, these three terms structure the research-worthy dimensions of armed groups' legitimacy politics. Each node caters to different research orientations and motivations. To illustrate this point, a brief exploration of how this research theorises legitimacy, legitimation, and recognition is necessary.

This study understands rebel legitimacy as an unobservable construct that could be discussed as a contested status, a perception, or an elusive destination where an armed group strives to surpass the prestige or reputability of its state opponent in the eyes of relevant interlocutors and audiences.[16] Legitimation, in contrast, refers to the observable processes and practices rebels employ to enhance their status or perception as being legitimate. These efforts, involving words and deeds, are subject to documentation and analysis. Finally, recognition denotes the overt acknowledgment of an armed group's status, authority, or legitimacy, typically expressed through public actions or events.

Considering this distinction, the empirical, sociological, or historical research approach to rebels' legitimacy politics should prioritise "legitimation" or "recognition" nodes depending on the research question and goals (see Barker 2001, 19–26). Conversely, normative, philosophical, legal, or prescriptive inquiries examining the legitimacy of power relations or an authority's morality would focus on the abstract "legitimacy" node. This study, focused on armed groups' efforts to gain legitimacy, prioritises legitimation. The following sections elaborate on the interpretation of each nodal concept.

[16] In this study, "legitimacy" serves a dual purpose. Primarily, it represents the abstract attribute an armed group aspires to. However, it also functions as an *umbrella* term encompassing the entire phenomenon of "politics of legitimacy" for armed groups. This broader usage acknowledges the interplay between the three conceptual notions and the players associated with them. In contrast, "legitimation" and "recognition" consistently refer to the specific processes and outcomes defined in the text.

3.2.1. Legitimacy

Legitimacy of rebels signifies an external actor's internalised perception of their existence or aspirations as justifiable, rightful, or beneficial.[17] This internalisation reflects a kind of supportive attitude or belief that contributes to the rebels' overall standing and power. While a degree of stability of this favourable disposition is entailed, legitimacy remains susceptible to change over time and circumstances. It is therefore constantly fluctuating.

This conceptualisation builds upon classical theory, where legitimacy is understood as the people's *belief* in a ruler's merited authority (Weber, 1978) or when such authority can be "*justified in terms of* their beliefs" (Beetham 1991, 11). It is a "generalized perception" of the appropriateness of the authority (Suchman 1995, 574) or a wellspring of "good will" towards it (Easton 1975, 444).

This thesis and classical legitimacy theory acknowledge the inherent power asymmetries that shape the claim and conferral of legitimacy. Nonetheless, the thesis departs from the theory's interpretation of the role of legitimacy within these dynamics. In the traditional view, legitimacy primarily functions to consolidate the existing power structure and stabilise relations within it. In other words, state leaders seek legitimacy to solidify their authority over their subjects. This legitimacy dynamic between the claimant (ruler) and the bestower (people) is often considered complete or self-contained. This study, however, challenges this view. It argues that the legitimacy relationship between an armed group and an international actor is inherently incomplete. To fully understand the interactions between the claimant (armed group) and the bestower (international actor), a third party—the armed group's state opponent—must be factored in.[18]

Furthermore, rebel legitimacy serves not only to strengthen the power relationship between the claimant (armed group) and the bestower (international actor) but also to disrupt the power relationship between the third party (state opponent) and the bestower. In simpler terms, the armed group seeks to de-legitimise its state enemy as much as it endeavours to legitimise itself. These efforts are two sides of the same coin. Consequently, the bilateral conceptualisation of legitimacy relations, characteristic of classical theory, appears to offer limited analytical value when applied to armed groups seeking international legitimacy. In such cases, a *triadic* or *trilateral* conception may prove more suitable, as it acknowledges the inherent role of rebels in civil wars as primarily counter-claimants to legitimacy.[19]

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[17] Beliefs and interests are often interconnected. "Each is constructed in terms of the other, and each is necessary to make the other comprehensible" (Barker 2001, 35).

[18] The armed group's state opponent is certainly a crucial third party in this legitimacy dynamic. Depending on the specific context, other actors may also warrant consideration within this third-party dimension.

[19] While claims and counter-claims are intrinsic to all legitimacy dynamics, irrespective of political contexts or actors, they become especially pronounced and impactful in the case of armed groups.

Examining legitimacy inherently involves encountering normative and ethical considerations, even within an empirical inquiry like this study. However, this work avoids pronouncing on the legitimacy of rebel claims. It neither justifies their actions nor offers rationalisation for their violence. Instead, it deconstructs their legitimation strategies, often built upon specific ideologies, values, or norms. The focus here is not to make claims *about* the rebels, but rather to study the claims *of* them.[20] This analysis, therefore, is "interpretive", exploring meanings, rather than "legislative", prescribing standards (Bauman 1992). As previously established, legitimacy, whether conceptualised as a belief or an attribute, is not directly measurable (Barker 2001, 26). Consequently, the focus here is on observable recognition moments and rebels' legitimation claims. Overall, this study views legitimacy politics as contested, interactive, and relational processes.

3.2.2. Recognition

Similar to individuals, social groups crave social recognition.[21] In this research, recognition is imparted by an event, moment, act, or decision where an international actor expressly approves or acknowledges the conduct, authority, or aspirations of an armed group. It is an occasion with "a publicly symbolic or declaratory force," marking a point where the group can no longer be ignored and engagement becomes warranted (Beetham 1991, 18). Thus, recognition bolsters the group's visibility and standing. However, this occasion functions as a form of symbolic capital that may or may not translate into tangible advancement of the armed group's political objectives or international position. Empirically, discerning the motives behind recognition remains a challenge. These motives could be a calculated pursuit of utility, a response to the group's legitimacy claims, or even an idiosyncratic perception of the rightfulness or justifiability of the group's actions.

Put simply, recognition events are crucial for armed groups' international standing. However, recognition is not necessarily directly tied to the group's legitimacy claims. While these two aspects often go hand-in-hand, the connection is not guaranteed. This study avoids assuming that an armed group's efforts to gain legitimacy will organically lead to recognition, especially without clear evidence. When a clear link between these two aspects exists, it is likely because of broader factors that make recognition more likely. Unlike readily available resources, securing recognition requires active effort by the armed group. Yet, simply pursuing recognition is not

[20] See von Soest and Grauvogel's (2017) study of authoritarian regimes' claims to legitimacy.

[21] German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit" (1807) laid the groundwork for the philosophical exploration of recognition. Scholars like Axel Honneth (1996) and Nancy Fraser (2000) have built upon this foundation with significant theoretical contributions. This study, however, prioritises an empirical investigation of recognition within the realm of armed groups' international politics.

enough to guarantee it. Regardless of their origin or source, recognition moments themselves function as a form of external validation and parallel legitimation for the armed group.

In line with Clément et al. (2021, 15), this study posits that some form of recognition is often embedded within deliberate, non-degrading, and non-hostile interactions with armed groups. Such recognition can manifest in various forms, including meetings with high-ranking foreign officials, sponsorships by external powers, a seat at the peace negotiations table, or the official acknowledgment of insurgents as a legitimate government or national representative. Easton's (1975, 437) concept of *specific support* is closely linked, albeit not identical, to the understanding of recognition in this study. In other words, recognition events are typically specific to a particular issue and short-term in nature. An example is humanitarian engagement by international organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or Geneva Call with an armed group for delivering aid or prompting local cease-fires. Here, recognition is essentially not of the group's legitimation claims, values, or political project, but of its control over a certain territory and population.

Analysing recognition occasions requires a composite lens, considering *as* and *for* what, and *by whom* an armed group is recognised. Great power recognition, for example, carries immense weight. By virtue of their custodial and "managerial responsibilities" on the international stage (Bull 2012, 196; see also Kaczmarska 2017, 10), these powers can either hinder or bolster an armed group's aspirations for integration into the international state system (see Caspersen 2015, 189). Similarly consequential for an armed group's political trajectory and legitimacy journey are neighbouring countries. Civil wars often transcend borders, posing dilemmas and threats to regional actors, who may intervene on behalf of the rebels or their enemy government. In such scenarios, the absence of regional support can be fatal, not only to the group's external ambitions, but to its very existence. In essence, regional recognition is a linchpin for armed groups' quest for international standing.

While unpacking the nuances of a recognition event reveals insurgents' specific position or power, it rarely defines their overall international standing. The latter hinges on a complex interplay of motives, conditions, and global historical contexts (Hensell and Schlichte 2021), involving diverse actors. Existing typologies often conceptualise recognition as a spectrum, ranging from thin to thick (Wendt 2003, 511) or informal to formal. While such distinctions based on content or format are valuable, this study prioritises the impact of recognition events in terms of *magnitude*, *durability*, and *reversibility*.

"Magnitude" refers to the degree to which recognition solidifies the group's material and moral strength relative to its adversaries. "Durability" reflects the timeframe over which this

advantage persists. "Reversibility" indicates the ease with which the recognition's positive effects could be undermined by the group's state enemy or other actors. In essence, recognition events with greater magnitude, durability, and less reversibility are deemed more significant, regardless of their specific content or formal status. In reality, armed groups often encounter both recognition and de-recognition episodes. These three indicators, however, help identify the most consequential events for the rebels' legitimacy quest.

The study understands de-recognition as the withdrawal or negation of recognition, with consequences opposite to those of recognition. Including this concept is important, as armed groups frequently experience de-recognition at both domestic and international levels. An illustrative example is 'terror listing,' which can severely obstruct insurgents' external relations, support networks, and funding. The *US State Department* (2022) emphasises that proscription "[s]tigmatizes and isolates designated terrorist organizations internationally." Frederic Lebaron (2014, 6541) argues that acts of stigmatisation and discrimination constitute negative symbolic capital in a Bourdieusian sense. Given the enduring stigma associated with the 'terrorist' label, avoiding proscription becomes a primary concern for legitimacy-seeking armed groups.

3.2.3. Legitimation

"No power can be satisfied with existing just as power, that is, as brute force, entirely devoid of justification" (Bourdieu 1996, 265). This justification, seen as "a form of coherence" (Barker 2001, 39), aligns actors' identities and actions, presenting them as moral, just, or beneficial for the public good. Acts of justification and contestation lie at the heart of legitimation claims—the "lifeblood" of legitimacy politics (Reus-Smit 2007, 159). These intentional and observable claims rarely go unchallenged. Rebel groups may employ legitimation strategies to cultivate international goodwill, demonstrate commitment to their cause, showcase the viability of their goals, or emphasise the benefits of their agenda. Ultimately, these efforts aim to align the rebels with values and interests deemed as righteous and advantageous by international actors.

Legitimacy cannot be established in a vacuum (Zelditch 2006, 340). It presupposes a pre-existing normative framework of socially sanctioned values, rules, beliefs, procedures, and purposes. Legitimation claims then serve as bridges, aiming to connect the claim-maker's actions or goals to established norms or principles (ibid., 341-2). These claims are therefore invariably made with reference to familiar standards.[22] While scholars often underscore the discursive nature of legitimacy claims and counter-claims (Reus-Smit 2007), the principle "actions speak louder than

[22] Counter-claims function, in part, to expose hidden interests behind a claim, directly challenging its perceived normative or moral standing.

words" remains relevant for rebels seeking legitimacy. Although intertwined in practice, analytical distinctions can be drawn between "identification" strategies (encompassing declarative, ideational, discursive, or symbolic claims) and "substantiation" strategies (emphasising confirmative, demonstrative, behavioural, or practical claims) employed by armed groups.

Identification strategies focus on communicating what an armed group *is* or *represents*. They "give an account of who [the rebels] are" (Barker 2001, 34). This involves articulating the group's identity through ideologies, beliefs, values, symbols, myths, or specific understandings. These ideational justifications can facilitate "creating focal points for coalitions" with potential international partners (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 20). Insurgent discourse often employs positive self-representations contrasting with negative other-representations of their enemy (Chilton and Schäffner 2011, 315). Through such a contrast, the insurgent group "marks out its boundaries more clearly" (Barker 2001, 36).

On the other hand, substantiation strategies focus on demonstrating what an armed group *does* or *can do*. This includes the group's actions, policies, governance models, and most importantly, the use of coercive power. By showcasing their ability to engage in diplomacy, provide security and services, govern inclusively, or function as a resilient military force, rebels can influence perceptions and calculations of external actors. These actions may foster, at least in the short term, transient, transactional, or pragmatic forms of recognition.

Overall, legitimation practices can be sincere or manipulative; inward (about the self) or outward (about the other); normative or realist; and symbolic or practical. These practices aim to engage various publics and actors who may respond in diverse ways, potentially ignoring, contesting, rejecting, or confirming the claims. Analytically, these recipients can be categorised as constituencies and audiences. A constituency represents the social group from which the armed group requires a minimum level of legitimacy.[23] As previously discussed, the most critical constituencies for rebels seeking legitimacy are major powers and neighbouring countries to whom the rebels' legitimation claims are addressed or in which their interests are implicated (see Saward 2010, 49).

Audiences, distinct from constituencies, encompass a broader range of actors on the receiving end of legitimacy claims. These include individuals, media outlets, civil society organisations, diaspora communities, and other social groups. Unlike constituencies, audiences

[23] The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines "constituency" in two distinct ways. This dissertation adopts the older of them, conceptualising a constituency as a body of voters rather than a body of supporters. This choice aligns with the argument that neighbouring states and major powers function as the primary "electorate" for rebels seeking international recognition. By influencing these key actors, rebels aim to be recognised as legitimate representatives of a cause, community, or nation.

often receive these claims passively, but some may actively amplify or undermine the rebels' narrative. In a globalised world, journalists act as "multipliers and gatekeepers of political discourse" (Steffek 2009, 316), while the public can emerge as a mobilisation force, opposing unjust wars or supporting their victims (Gronau and Schmidtke 2016, 546). Media narratives and public pressure can ultimately influence the legitimation responses, or lack thereof, from relevant international actors.

To summarise, this section clarifies the dissertation's working definitions of the interconnected concepts of legitimacy, recognition, and legitimation. To illustrate these concepts metaphorically, an armed group's pursuit of legitimacy can be viewed as a *labyrinthine* journey towards the ever-elusive destination (legitimacy). The group's arduous march (legitimation) through this precarious path is marked by various stops along the way (recognition), some minor and others representing significant milestones.

Due to the empirical focus on the international realm in this study, several key points warrant emphasis. First, ideas and interests are not competing explanations for recognition; they are mutually constitutive. Internalised ideas shape how actors define their interests. Historically, major powers' strategic objectives and practices (i.e. interests) have become codified as international norms and rules (i.e. ideas). These norms, in turn, define what is considered legitimate and worthy of international support. Second, legitimacy alone, as a justifiable aspiration or righteous cause, cannot replace military capabilities or an effective presence on the ground for armed groups. While these factors can be mutually reinforcing (see Hurd 1999, 389),[24] neither alone guarantees the highest levels of recognition. This study's conceptualisation of legitimation therefore incorporates the rebels' military relevance. Finally, for rebel survival and international recognition, domestic and internal legitimacy are crucial. Without legitimacy within their local community and among their members, insurgents cannot effectively govern territories, negotiate with the outside world, or withstand the violence of the state enemy. Internal legitimacy is vital for group cohesion and long-term existence (Schlichte 2009, 34). Excluding these aspects from the core analysis is a matter of research scope, not a dismissal of their importance (see von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017, 277-278).

4. Literature Review

This research intersects with different academic literatures in the fields of political theory, comparative politics, conflict studies, security studies, and international relations. This section however engages with the three primary research areas of direct relevance—the theory of

[24] Legitimacy and coercion may also undermine one another.

legitimacy, legitimacy in international relations, and armed group in civil wars. The following review challenges the omission of armed groups as legitimacy-seeking actors in mainstream IR legitimacy scholarship and interrogates the core assumptions of legitimacy theory. In doing so, this review exposes the limitations of the theory in contexts of armed conflict and proposes avenues for a more inclusive theory of international legitimacy. Ultimately, this section highlights the under-theorisation of rebels' international legitimacy and the downplaying of their agency in IR and conflict studies.

4.1. Legitimacy and Legitimation in IR: From Neglect to Evolution

While long considered "the master question of politics" (Crick 1959, 150; Barker 1990, 4) and a concept "*as old as political philosophy itself*" (Beetham 1998), legitimacy has only recently gained significant traction in international relations studies (Mulligan 2006, 349–50; Charlesworth and Coicaud 2010, 2–7).[25] Historically, legitimacy remained primarily a national question (ibid., 19). Early IR discussions of the term centred on the state. Classical legitimacy theory, after all, emerged to explain the "right to rule" and the corresponding obedience of subjects to their rulers, a notion inherently tied to national governments. This state-centric focus, arguably, seemed incompatible with the anarchical and authority-less nature of the international system. Consequently, legitimacy as a concept was largely marginalised in international studies for a long time (see Barnett 1997, 529; Vincent and Wilson 1993, 129; Williams 1996, 40).

Max Weber (1978, 213), the leading theorist of legitimacy, emphasises that every authority "attempts to establish and cultivate a belief in its legitimacy." He further described legitimate orders as those "enjoy[ing] the prestige of being considered binding" (ibid., 31). Despite the centrality of Weber's work in power and domination studies,[26] his focus on legitimacy as a subjective belief has sparked some critique. Some argue Weberian legitimacy undermines the concept's ability to "judge" (Pitkin 1973, 283) or "properly signify a normative evaluation" of political regimes (Grafstein 1981, 456). David Beetham (1991, 11) notably argues that legitimacy resides not in popular beliefs, but in its justifiability based on those beliefs. However, as Rodney Barker (2001, 19-21) suggests, Weber does not posit two separate things: "legitimacy" and "a belief

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[25] Similarly, Hayden and Schick (2016, 1-2) noted the recent attention to the concept of recognition in IR, despite its long-established presence in philosophy, sociology, and political science.

[26] Ian Hurd (1999, 400) described Weber as "the modern master of the study of authority".

in legitimacy". Rather, rulers cultivate the latter through "legitimation,"[27] a core aspect of Weber's theory.[28]

The distinction between "legitimacy" as an evaluative concept and "legitimation" as an observable process underpins the divide between normative and empirical approaches to legitimacy research. Both approaches exist in IR, particularly as legitimacy discussions expanded to include non-state actors, such as international governance institutions, as agents in international politics. However, as Tallberg and Zürn (2019, 585) observe, the empirical study of international legitimacy "remains underdeveloped in comparison to existing normative treatments." This dissertation aims to address this imbalance.

A growing body of research in international relations analyses the legitimation efforts and crises faced by regional and global governance bodies, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the African Union (see Dingwerth et al. 2019; Hensell and Schlichte *forthcoming*; Zaum 2013).[29] This research highlights how legitimacy has become central to these organisations' role in "global governance," as they navigate cooperation and competition with governments, NGOs, businesses, and advocacy groups. Recurrently, these organisations engage in rhetorical and procedural strategies to legitimise themselves and de-legitimise rivals, often by associating themselves with norms of democracy, human rights, transparency, and good governance (see Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin 2022; Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte 2018).

In the post-Cold War era, Western liberal values have become the predominant benchmark for assessing legitimacy in the international system, encompassing both organisations and states. The universalisation of legitimacy criteria "brought into intimate relationship" the domestic and international legitimacy of the state (Clark 2005, 188). Prior to the Cold War, international

[27] While Rodney Barker addresses legitimation of both governments and rebels, his discussion, largely informed by Weber's core focus, remains centred on *self-legitimation*. Weber's theory, as interpreted by Barker, does not ignore the role of the *de-legitimation of the enemy*, which is part of the "active, contested political process" of legitimation, in which enemies "are necessary" parties (Barker 2001, 27-36). Yet, the de-legitimation side of the coin, in the author's reading of both Barker and Weber, has not been pronounced enough *theoretically*. Consequently, with Weber's work forming a cornerstone of classical legitimacy theory, the theory itself tends to obscure the competitive or contested nature of legitimacy. This, as discussed before, resulted in the traditional dyadic model of legitimacy relations. This dissertation, in contrast, argues that, particularly for armed groups, a triadic model is necessary. This model *explicitly* accounts for the contestation between the armed group and its state opponent.

[28] Some of the critique and misperceptions of Weber's theory can be attributed to the inconsistent (or unclear) usage of the term "legitimacy" in his discussions of authority at the interpersonal and the systemic levels (Blau 1963).

[29] The remainder of this literature review draws upon the debates discussed by Stephan Hensell and Klaus Schlichte in the introductory chapter of their book manuscript (and forthcoming edited volume), *Fighting for legitimacy: armed groups and the politics of international legitimation*. This volume originates from a larger research project, to which the dissertation's author and other scholars have contributed case studies. This dissertation itself is also part of this research project.

legitimacy was solely determined by consensus among great powers. While these powers still retain significant influence, globalisation has eroded their role as exclusive arbiters of legitimacy. To account for the increasingly diverse international stakeholders and audiences, IR scholarship has broadened its focus to include new actors in world politics, such as the media, elites, and ordinary citizens (see Hensell and Schlichte *forthcoming*). Notably, Dellmuth et al. (2022, 95) identify a significant disparity between the legitimacy perceptions of elites and citizens towards global governance.[30]

The study of legitimacy in IR has demonstrably evolved in its treatment of non-state actors. Scholars moved from viewing them merely as "audiences and constituencies, … of the legitimation activities" to recognising them as "genuine legitimating agents in their own right" (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018, 106). However, a crucial gap remains in the literature: the neglect of armed groups as significant non-state entities. The dissertation addresses this scholarly lacuna by asserting the agency of rebel groups as key players in international politics. Furthermore, including armed groups in IR legitimacy discussions offers a substantial contribution to knowledge. Specifically, it allows for a critical examination of the feasibility and applicability of core international legitimacy assumptions within disordered contexts. This study exposes areas where the theory holds and highlights areas for further development.

4.2. Towards an Inclusive Legitimacy Theory

As outsiders, armed groups seeking to become regularised members of the international system often need to disrupt that very system first. This disruption can take various forms, from completely replacing their state opponents within the system to establishing themselves as new members or sabotaging these opponents' international alliances and relations. However, this disruptive behaviour exists in tension with the rebels' aspiration for acceptance. To gain recognition, armed groups also need to identify with the dominant normative and strategic trends of the system, essentially reproducing them. Upon gaining recognition and insider status, these groups' disruptive role seems to cease as they often strive, like most other state and non-state members, to preserve the existing world order. This duality of system disruption and maintenance distinguishes armed groups from most ordinary state and international organisation actors. Consequently, analysing the question of legitimacy of armed groups may offer a different lens through which to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics that shape international legitimacy and, ultimately, the character of international relations.

[30] In the cited study, elites, defined as societal and political leaders, were considered the primary beneficiaries of globalisation. Citizens, defined as ordinary individuals, bore the brunt of the globalisation's burdens.

In existing scholarship, it is typically assumed that legitimacy is "hierarchically pursued" (Barker 2001, 31) within an asymmetric power relationship between "two actors" (von Billerbeck and Gippert 2017, 274). This model posits that the direction of legitimacy claims is up-bottom,[31] with the more powerful strives to be legitimised by the less powerful. However, this framework's assumptions are not fully transferable to contexts where rebels seeking external support and recognition. In such cases, legitimacy claims are down-top oriented. Furthermore, as previously argued, this binary model of legitimacy relations fails to capture the complexities of armed group-state interactions. A ternary conception is necessary, placing rebels on par with their state opponents and acknowledging the centrality of the competition involved.

Another core assumption in legitimacy studies is that legitimacy is inextricably linked to pre-existing authority. Hence, "[i]n the absence of authority, there would be no legitimacy problem" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 586).[32] This assumption marks a profound difference between rebels and global governance institutions. The latter are established with in-built authorities and legal mandates. While perceptions of their performance and conduct may vary, their authority is generally de jure and de facto recognised (see Hensell and Schlichte *forthcoming*). Put simply, these institutions are born *insiders* to the international system. Conversely, insurgents are *outsiders* with no such authorities over the foreign states or organisations they seek to court. The rebels' international journey can therefore be seen as an irregular migration from illegality to a form of "naturalisation" in the system.[33] To be brought into the fold as lawful participants of international politics, armed groups have to adopt the insiders' rhetoric and rules of "rightful conduct" (Charlesworth and Coicaud 2010, 61; see also Clark 2005).[34] To summarise, the case of armed groups challenges the notion that "legitimacy … is "parasitic" on authority" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 586) or that authority is the precursor of legitimacy. In other words, the inclusion of rebels in IR legitimacy research could bring to light a more two-way nature of the authority-legitimacy relationship than often suggested.

To develop a more inclusive theory of international legitimacy, it is important to account for the distinct challenges faced by armed groups. While states and global governance institutions are content with their category or class in the international system, legitimacy-seeking rebels aspire to metamorphose from "non-state" to "state" actors. In most cases, such transformation

[31] This reflects the prevailing consensus within "more conventional … perspectives" of studying legitimacy (Jeffrey, McConnell, and Wilson 2015, 3).
[32] "Without authority, legitimacy is a non-issue" (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, 591).
[33] The journey is further complicated by the perception that rebels, by definition, are violent actors.
[34] As previously discussed, assessments of rightful conduct reflect the hegemonic status of post-Cold War Western normative standards.

necessitates undermining the international standing of the rebels' state enemy. This creates a qualitative difference in legitimacy pursuit. Global institutions, unlike armed groups, cultivate legitimacy among diverse audiences without necessarily needing to displace competitors. Put differently, the recognition of their authority does not inherently hinge on ousting or de-legitimising rivals. Additionally, in an interconnected world, the proliferation of legitimacy audiences makes it cumbersome to state and non-state actors alike to target their legitimation strategies. This challenge is more compounded for rebels. Unlike global institutions whose legitimacy constituency can essentially be identified as those bound by its mandate or jurisdiction, rebels have no equivalent privilege internationally. Nonetheless, it is apparently reasonable for rebels to perceive major powers and neighbouring states as the constituency that should be won over to their side.

4.3. Rebels in Regional and Global Politics

This dissertation tackles two principal lacunae in conflict research. First, armed groups remain under-explored in analyses of their external relations with states. Second, the concept of rebels' international legitimacy in this research warrants further theoretical refinement.

Neighbouring states are particularly crucial for armed groups' survival and international standing. Without a nearby ally, an insurgent challenger can be more easily besieged by its governmental opponent. The literature on insurgencies highlights the critical role of "sanctuaries," "safe havens," or "bases" offered by borderland governments in fostering insurgent longevity and potential victory. As Erin Simpson (2010, 10) asserts, "in fact, few insurgencies survive without them" (see also Arreguín-Toft 2001, 122). Beyond immediate neighbours, a broader consensus exists in the literature that regional and foreign support, encompassing material, financial, moral, or promotional aid, is a prominent aspect of various armed conflicts, including civil wars, revolutions, insurgencies, and guerrilla warfare (see Galula 2006, 25–28; Greene 1990, 125–132; Joes 2004, 94–97; McCuen 1966, 64–69; see also Beckett 2005; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). However, the extant research on "external support" remains overwhelmingly state-centric in its approach.

Rebels remain nonetheless a central focus of conflict studies, with research examining them as both political collectives and actors assuming responsibilities beyond the battlefield. This scholarship has extensively explored areas such as internal structures and organisations (see Mahoney 2020; Mampilly and Stewart 2021; Parkinson and Zaks 2018; Sinno 2011), territorial governance modes (see Cunningham and Loyle 2021; Mampilly 2012), military strategies and tactics (see Reiter 2022; Weinstein 2006), mobilisation and membership (see Gates 2002; Regan

and Norton 2005), and economic profiles (see Collier 2000; Kubota 2020). However, despite some recent insightful discussions on the role of insurgent beliefs and ideologies in internal wars (see Hafez, Gade, and Gabbay 2022; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Maynard 2019), this literature remains under-developed.[35] This dissertation aims to address this gap by examining the role of identification and value commitment in the legitimation claims of armed groups.

While conflict and peace studies are traditionally focused on the domestic aspects of armed groups, they recognise the trans-national dimensions of civil wars. However, the role of rebels within these dimensions has often been overshadowed by the prioritisation of inter-state rivalries. Recent scholarship has begun to address this gap by placing extra-territorial politics of armed groups at the centre of analysis. This scholarship examines how rebels leverage various strategies to garner international support and legitimise their cause. These strategies include mobilising trans-national diaspora networks, deploying public relations campaigns to shape the conflict narrative, and forging alliances with foreign elites and ideological sympathisers. Significantly, engaging in diplomacy with external powers emerges as a common feature of rebels' efforts to internationalise the conflict and weaken their enemies (see Coggins 2015; Huang 2016). However, rebel success ultimately depends on more than just their political activism and international reputation. A complex composition of factors also plays a crucial role in that regard, including the historical moment (with its prevailing powers, currents, and windows of opportunity),[36] regional dynamics, and the relative strength of the state adversary.

This emerging research has shed light on the agency of armed groups in international relations, and emphasised their pursuit of international legitimacy and recognition as a tool to prevail over their state opponents.[37] However, with few exceptions (see Duyvesteyn 2017; Hensell and Schlichte *forthcoming*; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015), the concept of "international legitimacy" of rebels has received limited theoretical attention. The complex web of processes and relations that contribute to this legitimacy has rarely been explicitly differentiated or mapped out. Consequently, the question of how armed groups claim and acquire international legitimacy remains largely unanswered.

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[35] A dominant argument in this scholarship dismisses norms and beliefs as epiphenomenal in civil war, maintaining that their role is embedded in the structural conditions of the conflict or the instrumental schemes of the rebels. A counter-argument stresses that ideology can explain shifting conflict dynamics and rebels' violent strategies. For instance, some scholars assert that "[i]deology is indispensable for legitimating violence" (Hafez, Gade, and Gabbay 2022, 133).

[36] Jeffrey Byrne (2016, 34) wrote that the leaders of Algeria's National Liberation Front were concerned about "missing a global window of opportunity signified by the Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu" if they did not dispense with traditional politics and "take matters into their own hands" to advance their cause globally; see also Hensell and Schlichte's (2021) *Historical mapping of armed groups' recognition*.

[37] See, for example, *Civil Wars*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2015) and *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 28, no. 4-5 (2017).

The dissertation builds on this scholarship and strives to address its outlined limitations. On the one hand, this study disaggregates the concepts of legitimacy, recognition, and legitimation to facilitate a more rigorous examination of the phenomenon of rebel legitimacy. On the other hand, it delves into a crucial construction site within this phenomenon by analysing their own legitimation strategies. Without actively pursuing such strategies, it is highly improbable that armed groups will ever achieve significant recognition—either socially or officially—as legitimate political actors or ruling elites. After all, as mentioned before, international legitimacy has to be deliberately and persistently pursued.

5. Methodology

This section begins by introducing the theoretical foundations that underpin the methodology of the study. It then proceeds with an overview of the research process, including the research design, data collection, and data analysis methods. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the chosen approaches, along with the steps taken to mitigate them.

5.1. Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by the epistemological stance that "we do not have privileged access to the truth about international politics" (Wendt 1998, 101). If such truth exists, it likely resides within the lived experiences and perceptions of people. Consequently, the study does not seek universal formulas for understanding the legitimacy politics of armed groups. Instead, it focuses on interpreting the claims, meanings, and perceptions that rebels develop and invoke as they interact with others within specific contexts. Rebels' subjective viewpoints are crucial as they shape their behaviour and define their social world. In essence, this interpretivist dissertation strives to understand the subject matter "through the eyes of those being studied" (Bryman 1988, 61).

To do so, this study goes beyond simply reporting observations of how armed groups claim external legitimacy or how their claims may affect their international profile. Instead, it is dedicated to exploring the relevant processes, interactions, dynamics, and events that contribute to describing and explaining the constitution and workings of rebels' legitimation politics. However, to effectively translate this commitment into appropriate methodological choices, a self-reflective examination of some key conceptual foundations is necessary. These foundations include "context," "ideas," "agency," "language," and "causality."

Careful attention to context is central to this research. When examined comprehensively—through nuanced, varied, and chronological data—context can help delineate "a visualizable sequence of events, each event flowing into the next", thereby revealing crucial descriptive and

explanatory insights (Weiss 1994, 179). Without such "rich data"—commonly labelled as *thick description*—a thorough understanding of a political phenomenon is not possible (Maxwell 2004, 254).[38] Recognizing that politics unfolds within both temporal and spatial frameworks, this study takes seriously the historical and geographical dimensions of the politics of legitimacy.[39]

Still, a thorough account of this politics relies not only on external forces and structural constraints that rebels try to navigate. It also requires considering their internal cognitive and psychological conditions. While these conditions are not amenable to direct empirical observation, they can often be deduced from deeds and words. However, this study does not seek to uncover the true beliefs or values held by armed groups. Rather, it is only concerned with interpreting their expressed ideological, symbolic, or normative claims. For legitimacy-seeking rebels, "the *ideational terrain* is where the main political battles are fought" (Capoccia 2016, 97). Similar to other political actors, the actions of armed groups are shaped by their interests and beliefs, which are intrinsically linked.

This inquiry's emphasis on ideas necessitates foregrounding the role of agency and language in rebel politics. While structuralist and positivist approaches acknowledge the agency of political actors to some extent, they often downplay its significance. Goertz and Levy (2007, 33) aptly capture this tendency, noting that "[s]tructural explanations almost by definition downplay the importance of individuals." These frameworks prioritise the influence of impersonal and contextual factors on political outcomes. In contrast, this research prioritises understanding rebel preferences and decision-making processes, along with the micro-foundations of the conflicts in which they are embedded.

In addition, positivist and materialist research traditions often consider language as "a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world" (Gill 2000, 172–75). This inquiry, however, rejects this view. Language is both reflective and constitutive of the social world (Jaworski and Coupland 2006, 3; Paltridge 2012, 7). Humans use it not only to communicate, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to do things such as identification, argumentation, legitimation, persuasion, and authorisation (Chilton 2003, 8; Chilton and Schäffner 2011, 311–12; van Dijk 1997, 25–28). Consequently, this research foregrounds analysing rebel texts and statements to understand how they construct their identities, frame crises, and portray themselves as legitimate actors capable of addressing those crises.

[38] The term "thick description" was coined by the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

[39] Skocpol and Somers (1980, 174) emphasise that "[a]ttention to historical sequences is indispensable" to understanding social dynamics and transformations.

While this dissertation is primarily explorative, it also incorporates explanatory arguments to illuminate potential causal relations through which certain settings influence others within the research context. Any such arguments would be rigorously supported by diagnostic evidence and in-depth contextual analysis. To ensure clarity, the following paragraphs establish what causality means in this research.

For much of the 20th century, a dominant view in the philosophy of science held that causality could be understood through *regularity* (see Hempel and Oppenheim 1948).[40] Regularity refers to a systematic pattern where a change in one object (X) is consistently followed by a change in another (Y) (see Goertz and Mahoney 2012, 75). This perspective aligns with one of David Hume's two definitions of cause. As Joseph Maxwell (2004, 244) notes, Hume argued that direct perception of causality is impossible, and our understanding is limited to observing constant conjunctions. Causal inference in this view relies on systematic comparisons to explain *variation* in outcomes across cases. While embraced by quantitative researchers, this approach largely excluded qualitative inquiry from investigating causal relationships.[41] The rule became that "to establish a causal link, you must conduct an experiment" (Light, Singer, and Willett 1990, 5–6). This stance had a detrimental effect on sociological scholarship, forcing interpretive researchers to cloak their causal arguments in vague and redundant language, "hinting at what [they] would like, but don't dare, to say" (Becker 1986, 8).

This dissertation conceptualises causality not just as inter-case laws explaining regularities or variations, but also as intra-case *processes*. These processes, "in principle observable" (Maxwell 2004, 247), reveal how certain factors or events give rise to others.[42] In this latter sense, X is a cause of Y if, in X's absence, Y would not occur.[43] However, social phenomena rarely result from single causes. More likely, X is a complex of interrelated conditions. While each condition is individually *necessary*, it is only when these conditions occur together that they become *sufficient* to bring about the outcome. This processual understanding of causality is an open and dynamic paradigm sensitive to the interplay of agential, structural, and situational forces driving social change. While it may not yield general causal statements, it excels, as Miles and Huberman ((1984,

[40] The section on causality is adapted from the author's unpublished master's thesis, *Strategic Jihadism*, 2019.
[41] Numerous scholars challenged the dismissal of qualitative research's explanatory potential (see Britan 1978, 231; Denzin 1970, 26; Erickson 1992, 82).
[42] The conceptualisation of causality as a dynamic process was reinforced by the rise of pragmatism (in contrast to objectivism and constructivism) and process theory (in contrast to variance theory) as frameworks for social inquiry (Maxwell 2004, 246–50).
[43] In Hume's seminal discussion, this represents the second interpretation of causation. The dissertation's perception of the relationship between X and Y is more probabilistic than deterministic. This is to say, X is a cause of Y, when, in the absence of X, Y would be *unlikely* to occur (Goertz and Levy 2007, 17).

132) argue, at "developing explanations of what we call *local causality*—the actual events and processes that led to specific outcomes".

5.2. Research Design, Method, and Data

This inquiry adopted a qualitative approach, initially employing inductive reasoning. At the outset, the focus was on identifying patterns, configurations, or characteristics within a purposefully selected rebel case without aiming at developing a theory.[44] A case study design was deemed most suitable because it is "a research strategy based on the in-depth empirical investigation" of a phenomenon (Ragin 2000, 64–87) "within its real life context" (Yin 2009, 18). This extensive exploration allowed for a nuanced understanding of the selected case and its specific dynamics.

However, eschewing atheoretical empiricism, the dissertation strived to construct a heuristic frame for understanding the phenomenon of rebels' international legitimacy. To achieve this objective, a second case study was incorporated into the research design. Leveraging an abductive mode of inference, juxtaposing the two cases served to evaluate the theoretical claims generated from the first case and to ascertain whether similar or divergent cross-case patterns existed.

In this way, the method approach developed from a single-case study to a two-case comparative design. The comparative logic "sharpens our power of description, and plays a central role in … bringing into focus suggestive similarities and contrasts among cases" (Collier 1993, 105). The decision to select disparate, rather than similar, armed groups stemmed from a deep interest in investigating how the unique characteristics of different contexts influence the dynamics of legitimacy politics. Therefore, the research design adopted a contrast-oriented approach, where the two cases offer "a commentary on each other's uniqueness" (Skocpol and Somers 1980, 179).

This comparative research focuses on the People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan. These cases were chosen for their maximum divergence on key dimensions: ideology, history, political objectives, regional allies and adversaries, international affiliations, communication strategies, and global perceptions, particularly in Western media. The representativeness of these cases of legitimacy-seeking armed groups in general is not central to this study. However, a preliminary assessment suggests that the YPG might be considered a more

[44] For Arend Lijphart (1971, 691), a "single case can constitute neither the basis for a valid [theory] nor the ground for disproving an established [one]." Contrarily, John Gerring (2017, 248) opines that "[c]ase studies, if well constructed, may allow one to peer into the box of causality to the intermediate factors lying between some structural cause and its purported effect."

"typical" case, while the Taliban represents a more "outlier" example. This perception of the Taliban as a deviant case is further explored in the research limitations section.

To understand how legitimacy unfolds over time, a longitudinal within-case analysis was chosen for studying the YPG and the Taliban. Claiming legitimacy is an ongoing process, so a key question was: where exactly to begin the analysis? The preliminary research started at the turning points marked by significant changes in the international status of each group and carefully examined the events leading up to them. These junctures were readily identifiable and demonstrably relevant for the interpretation of how rebels claimed and contested legitimacy during periods of political upheaval and high-stakes interactions. Consequently, the analysis loosely drew on chronological methods like *critical junctures* (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Soifer 2012) and *process tracing* (Beach 2016) where the "focus in not only on what happened, but also on how it happened" (Vennesson 2008, 233). Process tracing, in particular, is a suitable approach to examine the justifications rebels offer for their actions and to probe the interplay between their beliefs and behaviour (ibid.).

To fully leverage the aforementioned methodological tools, a comprehensive data collection strategy was employed. Data was gathered from a variety of sources, including both those aligned with and opposed to the rebels, in order to create a well-rounded picture of the critical junctures under investigation. This data collection aimed to illuminate the identities and rationales behind the rebels' claims to legitimacy, and to explore the potential impact of these claims on the beliefs and interests of other actors. In-depth interviews and primary source documents were the core of this data collection effort.

In the case of the YPG, twenty-one interviews were conducted in Arabic, English, and German spanning from June 2021 to April 2022.[45] These interviews took place face-to-face in Bremen, Germany, as well as through various communication platforms, including phone calls and online applications such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Google Meet. The interviewees encompassed a diverse range of backgrounds, including: two European diplomats, one of whom holds a prominent position in foreign affairs in a Nordic state and another who formerly advised the United Nations–sponsored Syria peace talks; two associates of the representation bodies of the YPG in the US and Europe; two scholar-activists engaged in the Kurdish struggle in Central Europe; two former members of the YPG's parent organisation, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), from Syria and Turkey; three journalists and analysts specialising in Kurdish and Syrian affairs from Turkey, the US, and the Netherlands; two exiled Syrian activists, one Arab from Raqqa and one Kurd from Qamishli; four political science and international relations academics from

[45] For more details, see appendix 9.1.

Turkey and Central Europe; two Turkish experts on Syria based in Ankara; a terrorism analyst from Britain; and a former European volunteer with the YPG.

The interview information was cross-referenced with a range of primary and secondary sources in Arabic, English, German, Kurdish (Kurmanji), Swedish, and Turkish.[46] These sources included important (yet *seldom studied*) PKK party publications, official statements, parliamentary inquiries, media coverage, public speeches, and social media posts, as well as scholarly and news reports on the YPG.

In the case of the Taliban, ten semi-structured interviews and three informal talks were conducted in English and Arabic between October 2022 and July 2023.[47] These discussions occurred both in-person in Berlin and a nearby city in Germany, and online via Zoom, WhatsApp Calls, and WhatsApp Audio Messages. The participants included seven Afghans: two former officials of the now-defunct Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; an assistant to a top leader of the current Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan; an expert and independent reporter on Afghan affairs; and three Afghan migrants in Eastern Germany with diverse backgrounds, one of whom served in the former Afghan National Army. Additionally, the interviewees comprised two US experts: a leading scholar and former senior advisor in the US State Department, and a senior analyst with a US federal institution focusing to global peacebuilding; two German specialists on Afghanistan: a peace practitioner and a security expert; an Australian scholar and international lawyer; and a Canadian senior analyst on Afghan politics and society.

Mindful of the biases in some Western analyses of the Taliban, this study intentionally incorporates an array of different perspectives. It includes primary sources of the Taliban's own discourse, such as public statements and their online Arabic magazine *Al-Somood* (steadfastness or resilience).[48] The study also incorporates analyses from non-Western observers and experts based

[46] Though Kurdish, Swedish, and Turkish are not spoken by the author, primary sources in these languages were incorporated (through translation) to guarantee a comprehensive grasp of the YPG debate and ensure the voices of relevant political actors are represented.

[47] For more details, see appendix 9.2.

[48] The selection of Arabic language primary sources for both the Taliban and the YPG goes beyond mere authorial preference. Arabic serves as a principal communication medium for both groups (and many of their non-Western supporters and critics) despite not being their native tongue. For instance, in the case of the YPG, the *Sawt Kurdistan* (Voice of Kurdistan) bulletin, a publication of the PKK—the YPG's parent organisation—stands as a valuable primary source for understanding the PKK's ideological and organisational development over the years since this party magazine has appeared in Arabic in March 1986. Similarly, Arabic holds unique importance within the Taliban. This is exemplified by the publication of the group's Chief Justice Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani's treatise, *The Islamic Emirate and its System*, outlining the Taliban's governing philosophy and aspirations, published in April 2022 in Arabic only. This work represents the group's first manifesto of its kind. The treatise's translation status into Pashto or Farsi remains unclear, potentially limiting accessibility for non-Arabic readers. Using Arabic sources is intended to give space in the research for non-Western critics and analysts of the groups. This approach aims to balance and enrich the existing body of knowledge on the Taliban and YPG, which has often been dominated by Western perspectives.

in the Middle East and Central and South Asia, alongside US governmental documents, official statements, and Western scholarly and media coverage of the Afghan conflict and the Taliban.

5.3. Research Limitations and Remedies

Acknowledging the limitations of reflexivity and validity inherent to interpretive research, this study employed some measures to mitigate these concerns. First, following Schwandt's (2001) framework, meticulous attention was to ensure the research process was logical, traceable, and comprehensively documented. Second, a critical approach informed both data collection and analysis, with a particular focus on guarding against "confirmation bias"—the inclination of researchers to favour information that confirms their preconceptions (George and Bennett 2005, 2017; de Vaus 2001, 9–11).

This study actively sought out deviant cases and contradictory data for interpretation. The selection of the Taliban as a case study was partly driven by the anticipation that it might challenge or broaden the conclusions drawn from the YPG. The Taliban—a self-identified jihadi nationalist group—represent a clear outlier among international legitimacy-seeking non-state armed actors.[49] For instance, unlike jihadi organisations like the Islamic State (IS or *Daesh*) and al-Qaeda, which repudiate the international system, the Taliban accept this system and strive to be recognised within it. In addition, the Taliban stand apart from nationalist rebels who prioritise the international legitimacy of their de facto governments as a paramount strategic objective. The Taliban pursue legitimacy, but only on their own terms.

Last, data diversification and triangulation were employed to minimise both the weaknesses of process tracing and the risk of systematic bias inherent in relying on one or few information sources. This involved considering alternative descriptive or explanatory accounts that could challenge the study findings. Sometimes, understanding a situation fully entails examining what happened alongside what could have happened under different conditions (Bueno de Mesquita 1996, 229).

6. Overview of the Dissertation's Research Papers

This section provides an overview of three academic papers comprising this cumulative thesis. These papers include a published article on the People's Defence Units (YPG), as well as two manuscripts on the Taliban. One manuscript is scheduled for publication as a chapter in an edited

[49] It is important to note that the Taliban have emerged as a de facto state actor since 15 August 2021.

volume on the politics of legitimacy of armed groups.[50] The other manuscript is currently under review at an academic journal.[51]

6.1. The YPG/PYD: From the Mountains to the Élysée

The first paper, published in the *Middle East Journal* in 2023 (see Elsayed 2023), is titled "From the Mountains to the Élysée: The Precarious International Legitimacy of The Syrian Kurdish YPG and PYD". It explores the international rise of the YPG and its political front, the Democratic Union Party (PYD, from the Kurdish *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*). The YPG/PYD came to the fore as de facto rulers of most Kurdish-inhabited regions in northern Syria after the peaceful anti-Assad uprising of 2011 descended into a civil war. The article focuses on the only transformative legitimacy episode in the YGP/PYD's political life so far. This episode occurred after the months-long battle for Kobani ended in January 2015,[52] where the YPG/PYD were recognised as counter-terrorism partners by the US and Western armies within the Global Coalition against *Daesh* (the Islamic State, IS).[53]

This paper argues that although fighting Daesh opened up a possibility space for this accidental partnership, a more subtle understanding of how the alliance between the West and the YPG/PYD emerged and evolved over time is not possible without considering these groups' legitimation strategies. Simply put, while the Western imperative to eliminate Daesh is indispensable for understanding this relationship, it is by no means an exhaustive explanation of the Western-YPG/PYD alliance.

Based on a thorough examination of the forces at play during the Kobani critical juncture, it seems that two YPG/PYD's legitimation strategies directly contributed to their designation as comrades in arms of the Pentagon and Western militaries. The first is the "shielding denial of PKK ties". This is a discursive claim with which the YPG/PYD—both Syrian fronts of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—sought to disavow their parent guerrilla group, which is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, the EU, and Turkey. Such denial shielded the YPG/PYD from the banishment and stigmatisation associated with the 'terrorist' label and made a partnership with the US legally possible. The second is the "battlefield performance". This is a practical claim with which the YPG/PYD proved their viability as an effective and dependable infantry force against Daesh.

[50] As referred to earlier, the edited volume and this dissertation are parts of the same broader research project.
[51] The *Politics, Religion & Ideology* journal.
[52] Kobani (officially known as *Ayn al-Arab*) is a small city located on the Syrian-Turkish border.
[53] This comes from *Da'ish*, an Arabic acronym of *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham* (the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, ISIS).

Fighting alongside the globe's mightiest army and supported by favourable Western media reporting, the YPG/PYD aspired to extend the recognition of their counter-terrorism mission to their political project in north-east Syria. The empirical evidence in this study suggests that the YPG/PYD's post-Kobani "identification with Western values" and "diplomacy" have contributed to enhance their status in Western capitals. The YPG/PYD have mastered the language of democracy, feminism, secularism, and plurality—themes that are music to the Western ears—and the practice of diplomacy and dialogue. In both their discourse and diplomatic activities, the YPG/PYD actively vilified and de-legitimised their principal state opponent—Turkey.

Despite the embrace and support of the YPG/PYD, no Western country accorded them or their statelet in north-east Syria a formal status in international politics. Several reasons account for that failure on the YPG/PYD's side. Prominent among them, as all interviewees agreed, is Turkey. Ankara stands as the insurmountable legitimacy barrier against the YPG/PYD's international aspirations.

Ultimately, this article could have benefited from a more detailed counterfactual analysis, particularly concerning the Kobani moment. The study is limited by the absence of any other significant recognition event for the YPG/PYD. Nonetheless, the paper highlights three key factors for their role in legitimising the YPG/PYD and their potential relevance to other cases. First, the military relevance of rebels merits attention. The Pentagon's formal partnership with the YPG would not have materialised had the group not demonstrably emerged as a potent ground force against Daesh. Second, the rebels' projected identity and its alignment with norms of appropriate behaviour and conduct on the global stage (in the present day, Western liberal values) significantly facilitate their acceptance in the West. The YPG/PYD's secularism and professed commitment to democratic and feminist ideals fostered productive engagement and stronger ties with Western officials. Lastly, the regional standing of the rebels is crucial for their international fortunes. Lacking regional allies and confronted by a formidable neighbour, Turkey, the YPG/PYD navigate a very precarious international course.

6.2. The Taliban's Pursuit of Recognition on Their Own Terms

In the second paper, titled "Recognition on Their Own Terms? The Dilemma of the Taliban's Doctrine in International Politics" (Elsayed *forthcoming*), the conclusions of the research on the YPG/PYD are examined for relevance in the Taliban case. The paper addresses a puzzle in the Taliban's politics of international legitimacy—they actively seek official recognition as the de jure Afghan government while simultaneously implementing policies that undermine that goal. The proposed answer of the paper is that the Taliban pursue recognition not as a strategic objective,

but only on their own terms. They are cognisant of the perks of such recognition and desire them, but not at the expense of their identity and religious beliefs. Although no country has officially recognised the Taliban government (i.e. the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), restored on 15 August 2021, the group has developed more diplomatic relations and external connections than during its previous rule over Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001.

Unlike armed groups which often find themselves grappling with the complexities of adapting their legitimacy claims across varying domestic and international contexts, the Taliban have bypassed this challenge. From the outset, they have steadfastly anchored their legitimating ideas and practices in what they perceive as the authentic essence of Islam and Afghan identity. It could be argued that preserving their Islamist and jihadi legitimacy, especially within their ranks and among the local population, has consistently remained their central priority.

This inquiry finds that surpassing the Kabul government and its Western patrons in battle and governance was demonstrably the Taliban's most powerful legitimation strategy leading up to the February 2020 Doha Agreement with the US which officialised the group as the foremost Afghan political power. By standing their ground for almost two decades, the Taliban compelled recognition from the US and others as a force to be reckoned with. A currently prevailing international viewpoint, as articulated by UK Chargé d'Affaires Robert Dickson, suggests that attempting to overthrow the Emirate militarily would exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and empower militant groups operating in the region, thereby posing threats to regional and global security (see *Amu TV*, 2023). Consequently, while the Taliban's rule may be undesirable to many nations, the group's current international standing is grounded in the pragmatic reality of its effective control of Afghanistan and the absence of viable alternatives to it. Legitimacy does not solely stem from deeming an authority as rightful, but also from perceiving it as justifiable.

The paper also explores how changing international factors (e.g. the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world order) and regional dynamics (e.g. the group's rapprochements with Moscow and Tehran, among others) have impacted the legitimation of the Taliban, initially as insurgents and later as rulers. Time and again, the Taliban's performance in both battlefield and governance appears to underpin much of what they achieved in Afghanistan and beyond. Therefore, it is perplexing that most Western analyses of the Afghan conflict have left crucial questions unanswered. One of these questions is why the Taliban's fighting morale remained exceptionally unwavering against some of the world's most powerful militaries. The failure to grasp this vital dimension of the Taliban's insurgency (2001-2021) stems from a broader negligence of appreciating the legitimising power and influence of culture and identity in Afghanistan. The paper

addresses this gap by elucidating how the Taliban's discursive and insurgent campaigns tapped into Afghan history, religion, and collective identity, striking a responsive chord with many Afghans.

6.3. The Janus Face of the Taliban's Worldview and Rationality

The significance of the Taliban's professed beliefs and values for their politics and international standing warranted an extended investigation in the last research manuscript of this dissertation, titled "Beliefs and International Legitimacy: The Janus Face of the Taliban's Political Worldview and Value Rationality".

In this third paper, a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between the Taliban's value systems and their global fortunes is undertaken. The chronological tracing of this relationship focuses on three milestones: the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Doha Agreement in 2020, and the restoration of the Islamic Emirate in 2021. The dissertation's second paper has already argued that the trajectory of legitimacy-seeking rebels is contingent on their domestic power and on their interactions with external powers abroad. In such interactions, the strategic interests and normative characters of these powers should be considered. Building on that, the "Beliefs and International Legitimacy" paper establishes that, although the Taliban have evolved as political and expressive agents over the years, their ideational canon—despite evolution and changes—has proved to be a double-edged sword in their quest for official international status.

On the one hand, such a canon underpinned the insurgent Taliban's resilience in service provision and warfare, endowing them with integrity and invincibility that their enemies seemed to lack. The insurgents' military prowess and local support helped bring about the Doha Agreement. This accord bolstered the Taliban's domestic authority and international profile while subverting those of their domestic rival regime. The subsequent capture of Kabul, although it did not yield immediate official recognition from other states, was essential for the Taliban's claim to be the rightful, sitting Afghan government. It also meant that countries with interests in Afghanistan will have no choice but to work or engage with the group.

The post-2001 Taliban utilised modern communication tools and political language to promote their cause. Their externally-oriented rhetorical legitimacy claims were anchored in contemporary principles such as human rights, international law, sovereignty, economic cooperation, and environmental protection. Such claims coexisted with the group's long-standing dogmatic and Manichean narratives of the conflict with the West and its local agents, addressed to their members, Afghans, and Muslims at large.

On the other hand, the ruling Taliban's domestic policies and foreign affairs, shaped by their professed idiosyncratic doctrinal and cultural norms, present the group as a potential or

looming security and normative liability to some external powers. While neighbouring states are effectively bringing the Emirate into the regional fold, Western countries are more sceptical and hostile towards it. This is not unforeseen, given that for decades these countries have been accustomed to securitising Islamist political actors rather than recognising them as political peers. In her discussion of the evolution of *Ennahda* (the renaissance), the Tunisian Islamist movement, Hanna Pfeifer (2023, [50:25]) stated that "it is almost impossible to remain an Islamist actor if you want to gain international recognition". It is, therefore, not surprising that the Taliban's restoration of the world's sole jihadi nationalist government poses an unprecedented conundrum for Western governments.

A comparison of the reactions to the Taliban rule from China, Russia, and regional countries with those from Western powers highlights differences in how rebel governments are recognised or engaged with. On one side, neighbouring states expect more immediate and considerable impacts on their interests resulting from the nearby rebel regime. Hence, they are required to carefully and clearly choose whether to support or oppose such a regime. On the other side, distant powers face fewer direct consequences and can afford to be uncertain or ambivalent towards the ruling rebels. The diverging international approaches towards the Emirate may also be an indication of a new global paradigm, wherein regional alliances or plurilateral coalitions possess greater leeway to pursue political paths independent of dominant Western powers. This trend reflects potential changes that are currently occurring in the international system.

Finally, despite their different paths to power and distinct achievements on the international stage, the cases of the YPG/PYD and the Taliban reveal more convergent trends than initially anticipated. This includes the role of certain scope conditions influencing the dynamics of legitimation, notably the regional support for or hostility towards armed groups. Both case studies provide consistent accounts of how rebel groups claim international legitimacy, emphasising the significant impact of projected identities and armed actions in this process. The following concluding section elaborates on these points.

7. Conclusion

This dissertation examines how rebels involved in civil wars pursue international legitimacy, and how their legitimation claims may enhance their global standing. Focusing on the Syrian Kurdish People's Defence Units (YPG) and the Afghan Taliban, the research highlights common dynamics in their quest for external recognition despite their stark ideological and organisational differences. The YPG, controlling much of north-east Syria since 2013 (under various names and structures),

and the Taliban, ruling Afghanistan as the Islamic Emirate for the second time since 2021, offer a compelling comparative case. By analysing their respective trajectories on the global stage, the study aims to illuminate broader patterns in how armed groups leverage armed action and identity projection in their competition with state opponents at home and abroad. Still, this thesis acknowledges that the success of rebels depends on their efforts as well as other factors beyond their control. Subsequent sections detail the theoretical and empirical findings drawn from the experiences of the YPG and the Taliban. The dissertation concludes with reflections on the research process and recommendations for future studies.

7.1. Rebel Legitimacy as a Conceptual Triad

The relational character of legitimacy is well-established in existing literature. Traditionally, legitimacy has been conceptualised as a two-way relationship between a claimant (e.g. ruler) and a grantor (e.g. subjects). While legitimation of oneself and de-legitimation of the opponent are intertwined, classical legitimacy theory does not emphasise these two sides of the legitimacy coin equally. This is likely because legitimacy is viewed as a contestation, implicitly encompassing both actions. Regardless, this imbalance has led to a neglect of "competition" or "third-party" or "external" influences as a *distinct* theoretical concern. The works of prominent legitimacy theorists like Max Weber and David Beetham conceptualise legitimacy as a bilateral relationship.

This dyadic conceptualisation proves reductive in cases of rebel legitimacy, as exemplified by the YPG and the Taliban. Understanding the legitimacy relationship between an armed group and an international actor requires juxtaposing it with the interaction between that international actor and the state opponent of the armed group. In a world devoid of *terra nullius*, an armed group seeking to legitimise control over territory or represent its inhabitants cannot begin solely with self-legitimisation; de-legitimising the incumbent government is a crucial first step. Regardless of the sequence, the core argument persists: rebel groups engage in international pursuits not just as claimants, but more importantly, as counter-claimants to legitimacy. As Isabelle Duyvesteyn (2017, 681) emphasises, while "external aspects" have been marginalised in the "dominant state-based treatment" of legitimacy, they are "of paramount importance" for rebels. To illuminate these aspects, conceptualising rebel legitimacy as a triad offers a more nuanced framework.

In the triadic model of rebel legitimacy, two rival actors are central: the armed group and its state opponent. External powers face a challenge in concurrently supporting or challenging both due to the zero-sum nature of the competition between these actors. Simply put, endorsing one side inherently undermines the legitimacy or credibility of the other. The YPG and the Taliban cases illustrate this dynamic. Declining international perception of the state opponent coincided

with a boost in the rebels' status. Increased Western tensions with Turkey correlated with stronger diplomatic support for the YPG. Symbolic YPG receptions at the Élysée Palace served to both elevate the group's profile and diminish that of Turkey. Similarly, the 2020 Doha Agreement dealt a severe blow to the Afghan Republic's international legitimacy, while concurrently ushering in a diplomatic resurgence of the Taliban.

Yet, the triadic conception should not be misunderstood as implying that rebels' international status solely mirrors changes in that of their state adversary. While competition dynamics are vital, they represent only one aspect of the complex interplay of conditions shaping armed groups' external trajectories. This tripartite approach aims to place both sides of legitimacy politics (positive self-representation and negative other-representation) on an equal theoretical and analytical footing. While this binary is important for all political actors, the de-legitimation dimension of it holds particular significance for rebels seeking international recognition. Thus, a robust theoretical framework for analysing rebel international relations must explicitly highlight this dimension. The tripartite approach also increases the visibility of how rebels actively contribute to the erosion of the state enemy's standing rather than passively benefiting from it. Although the impact of inter-state relations on armed groups' domestic and global objectives is well-documented, the reciprocal effect—how armed groups influence inter-state relations—remains largely unexplored.

7.2. Regional Legitimacy Comes First

The ability of rebel groups to establish a regional foothold is crucial to their advance in garnering considerable international support and legitimacy. For rebels contesting state authority, cultivating positive relations with neighbouring countries is not only crucial for their global aspirations, but also for their very survival. Unlike distant states with the luxury of strategic disengagement from faraway civil wars, proximate countries face a direct spill-over threat. This compels these countries to become invested in the conflict, leading them to either support or oppose the rebel cause. Moreover, the influence of regional states can extend to granting or denying rebels access to critical resources like safe havens, funding, recruits, and humanitarian aid. Furthermore, they can act as gatekeepers, facilitating or hindering rebels' access to major foreign capitals, international organisations, and world media. In this way, neighbouring countries play a pivotal role in shaping the international support and recognition landscape for armed groups.

While the positions of neighbouring countries on an armed group may vary, the most critical actors are those whose stance significantly impacts the rebels' military and diplomatic objectives. Strategically motivated interventions, as opposed to tactical ones, hold greater weight

in shaping rebel fortunes. Illustrative of this point are the contrasting cases of the YPG and the Taliban. Despite garnering significant international goodwill in the West, the YPG lacks regional legitimacy, facing opposition from Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.[54] The group has particularly suffered military and diplomatic losses due to Ankara's relentless campaign against the PKK and its affiliates.

In stark contrast, the Taliban insurgency found its most dependable, and at times sole, allies in segments of Pakistani society and authorities. Beyond Islamabad, détentes with erstwhile regional adversaries like Tehran and Moscow facilitated the group's struggle, ultimately culminating in the restoration of the Islamic Emirate. Notably, Qatar continues to serve as a key hub for the Taliban's diplomatic activities. While formal recognition of the group remains elusive, neighbouring states are gradually normalising the Emirate's status within regional forums.[55] This suggests that, for the Taliban, the path to considerable international legitimacy may well be paved by regional acceptance. In summary, the comparative study of the YPG and the Taliban yields a key finding: rebel groups' international legitimacy may potentially be prefigured by their regional standing.

7.3. Standing Their Ground: The Rebels' Anchor of Legitimation

In line with earlier literature suggesting that powerful armed groups are more likely to achieve their legitimacy goals (Coggins 2011, 443), this study highlights the importance of demonstrating power in rebels' legitimation strategies. The YPG's battlefield performance against Daesh increased their appeal to Western powers and press, and the Taliban's unyielding resistance to the US military prompted Washington to negotiate with them.

While armed action can be a double-edged sword for rebel legitimacy, it remains their primary tool of power and legitimacy contestation. Armed groups leverage military power to influence both the emotional (affective) and practical (pragmatic) attitudes of local communities and foreign powers. The impact, however, varies considerably. Wielding weapons against a formidable state enemy can signify defiance, prove commitment to a cause, evoke the David vs. Goliath narrative, foster underdog support, nurture collective identity, and inspire further solidarity and mobilisation among the aggrieved. Disciplined and effective violence can be a bedrock for stability, territorial control, service provision, and domestic support.

[54] On 14 March 2024, in a joint statement with Turkey, Iraq banned the PKK. The possibility cannot be entirely discounted that the Assad regime in Syria may, under conducive circumstances, choose to alter its current tolerant policy towards the YPG.

[55] On 30 January 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping accepted the credentials of the Islamic Emirate's ambassador to Beijing.

Still, these mental effects and ground realities may not be inherently critical for sustaining the pursuit of rebel legitimacy, except insofar as they cultivate the perception of an armed group as an indispensable player in the conflict and future peace. Essentially, armed action can be a successful legitimation strategy when it helps rebels establish their resilient and adaptable presence—on the battlefield and beyond—as a reality that others cannot easily ignore or dismiss.

7.4. Identifying with Western Norms: A Rebels' Compass for Legitimation?

Both the YPG and the Taliban strive for recognition as formal actors on the global stage, with the Taliban particularly seeking membership in the UN and other international organisations. However, the analysis of their political trajectories reveals the significant influence of identity projection on rebels' external perceptions. The YPG case exemplifies how cultivating an identity that aligns with Western ideals fosters greater understanding and receptivity among Western actors. By joining the 'counter-terrorist' camp and espousing the language of democracy, feminism, and secularism, the YPG has garnered favourable media coverage and has furnished Western governments with moral justifications for partnering with it.

Conversely, a significant obstacle to the Taliban's attainment of Western recognition is the incompatibility between their identity beliefs and Western norms. Western officials, long accustomed to securitising Islamist actors, have been grappling, since 15 August 2021, with the conundrum of engaging with the Islamic Emirate, the world's sole jihadi nationalist government.

On the Taliban's side, while seemingly indifferent to the secular character of the global system they seek to join, they are determined to roll back Western influences inside Afghanistan. This strategic approach is further evident in the group's externally-oriented pronouncements. Throughout their trajectory, from insurgency to present rule, the Taliban strategically invoked international principles of self-determination, sovereign equality, and non-interference (principles they found compatible with their own values). This calculated invocation aimed to legitimise both their movement and their subsequent position of power in Afghanistan.

Although widespread Western acceptance of the Taliban appears unlikely, regional and global political realignments may present the group with alternative avenues for international recognition. Neighbouring countries like China and Russia, aligned in their pursuit of a world order less beholden to Western hegemony, are cautiously integrating the Emirate into the regional fabric. Nonetheless, the current international system, lacking inclusivity for the world's diverse cultures and traditions, presents a steeper path to legitimacy for armed groups whose ideologies and identities deviate from Western norms.

Finally, within the diplomatic realm, the YPG and the Taliban leveraged their domestic power position and identities vis-à-vis those of their state enemies. Dialogue and negotiation with foreign actors thus became central to their quest for recognition. The centrality of rebel diplomacy in garnering external support and recognition is well documented in the academic literature.

7.5. Final Reflections and Future Research

This dissertation benefited from participating in a larger project investigating similar themes, albeit with distinct focuses. Notably, several findings in this research resonated with those of other rebel groups studied within the project, such as the Polisario Front in Western Sahara and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (Haftar's militia alliance) in Libya.

The author's fluency in Arabic, a language used by both the YPG and the Taliban, facilitated access to a wealth of knowledge from and about these groups. Knowledge of Kurmanji, Pashto, or Farsi would have opened doors to a wider range of invaluable material. Field visits to Syria and Afghanistan could have provided deeper understanding of the groups and a first-hand experience of the social and cultural contexts in which they operate, but logistical and financial constraints precluded this possibility. The linguistic limitations and the absence of on-site research have undoubtedly constrained the comprehensiveness of the analysis in this study.

The author acknowledges Michael Patton's (1990, 423) caution that once qualitative researchers start to interpret explanatory or descriptive relations "they fall back on the linear assumptions […] and begin to specify isolated variables" without considering their context. While the author has strived to avoid this pitfall, the ultimate judgment of his success in this regard lies with the reader.

Ultimately, this thesis shows armed groups are not passive actors in international politics; they actively shape and influence global politics. Future research can explore two promising avenues. Firstly, while the impact of inter-state relations on armed groups is well-studied, the reverse effect remains under-investigated. A valuable research direction could therefore be examining how armed groups influence bilateral and multilateral state relations. The YPG's impact on Turkish-American relations or the insurgent Taliban's influence on Pakistan-US ties constitute potential case studies. Secondly, legitimacy-seeking armed groups often seek entry into the international system, which rarely occurs without challenging the standing and power of existing member states. In this sense, rebels act as disruptive forces. However, their efforts to articulate their legitimacy within the system's normative framework also entail a degree of reproducing that system's values and rules. This creates a paradoxical situation: armed groups simultaneously disrupt

and reinforce the existing international order. Exploring this duality as both disruptors and reproducers presents a captivating avenue for further research.

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9. Appendix

9.1. List of Interviewees on the YPG

	Name	Position	Time	Medium
1	A. S.	Turkish digital news and Syria expert	28.06.2021	Zoom
2	I. F. C.	Turkish terrorism expert and academic	12.07.2021	Zoom
3	F. O.	Exiled Syrian Kurdish journalist from Qamishli	28.07.2021	WhatsApp call
4	William Christou	Beirut-based US journalist and analyst of Syrian affairs	23.08.2021	WhatsApp call
5	Ö. Ö.	Turkish Syria expert based in Ankara	27.08.2021	WhatsApp call
6	-	British terrorism analyst	30.08.2021	WhatsApp call
7	Amberin Zaman	Veteran journalist and analyst of Turkish and Kurdish affairs	04.09.2021	WhatsApp call
8	-	Central European academic and expert on Kurdish politics	07.09.2021	WhatsApp call
9	Hosheng Ossi	Former PKK member, literary critic, and novelist	12.09.2021	WhatsApp call
10	H. H.	Exiled Syrian Arab journalist from Raqqa	02.12.2021	Zoom
11	Ç. G.	Scholar-activist engaged in the Kurdish struggle in Central Europe	04.12.2021	In person
12	Mesut Yeğen	Professor of Kurdish and minority politics in Turkey	16.12.2021	Zoom
13	-	England-based Turkish expert on Kurdish history and international relations academic	01.01.2022	Google Meet
14	Wladimir van Wilgenburg	Dutch journalist and leading expert on Kurdish politics	10.01.2022	WhatsApp audio messages

15	-	Former associate of the YPG-affiliated Syrian Democratic Council abroad	04.02.2022	WhatsApp
16	K. S.	Scholar-activist engaged in the Kurdish struggle in Central Europe	09.02.2022	Zoom
17	-	Former European volunteer fighter with the YPG	22.02.2022	Zoom
18	C. W.	Former German senior advisor to UN-sponsored Syria peace talks	23.02.2022	Phone call
19	-	Current associate of a YPG-affiliated representative body in Central Europe	02.03.2022	Phone call
20	-	Former PKK member, expert in Kurdish politics, and humanitarian worker	04.03.2022	Zoom
21	Per Örnéus	Swedish Special Envoy for Syria Crisis	01.04.2022	Zoom

9.2. List of Interviewees on the Taliban

	Name	Position	Time	Medium
1	Barnett Rubin	Distinguished Afghanistan expert, scholar, and former advisor to the US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP), Richard Holbrooke	31.10.2022	Zoom
2	P. M.	Senior Afghanistan expert and political scientist at the German Bundeswehr	13.11.2022	Zoom
3	Andrew Watkins	Senior Afghanistan expert at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP)	05.12.2022	Zoom
4	-	Former Director-General for International Relations and Regional Cooperation at the National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	12.12.2022	WhatsApp call
5	-	Former Deputy State Minister for Peace in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	03.01.2023	Zoom

6	-	Senior Afghanistan and Central Asia expert at a world-leading peacebuilding organisation	11.01.2023	In person
7	-	Analyst and founder of an independent media platform dedicated to critiquing and presenting alternative narratives to mainstream portrayals of Afghanistan	10.01.2023	WhatsApp call
8	Rebecca Barber	Senior Human Rights Research Fellow at the University of Queensland	30.01.2023	Zoom
9	-	Assistant to a Deputy Prime Minister of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan	15.01.2023	WhatsApp audio messages
10	Graeme Smith	Senior Afghanistan analyst at the International Crisis Group	06.02.2023	WhatsApp call
11	Ruhollah Kohistani	Exiled Afghan in Germany	05.07.2023	In person
12	Azim -	Exiled Afghan in Germany and former member of the Afghan National Army of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	05.07.2023	In person
13	Farid -	Exiled Afghan in Germany	05.07.2023	In person

Part Two: Compilation of Research Papers

Paper No. 1

From the Mountains to the Élysée

The Precarious International Legitimacy of the Syrian Kurdish YPG/PYD

From the Mountains to the Élysée
The Precarious International Legitimacy of the Syrian Kurdish YPG/PYD

This article examines the international legitimacy of the main Kurdish militia in northern Syria, the People's Defence Units (YPG), and its affiliated political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Despite their origins in the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), listed as a terrorist organisation in many countries, the YPG and PYD were anointed as partners of the Global Coalition against Daesh/ISIS and have been celebrated in Western capitals and press ever since. To understand this unusual trajectory, this article argues that, although defeating ISIS opened a "possibility space" for this alliance to emerge, the YPG and PYD's discursive and practical legitimation strategies have contributed to their remarkable international diplomatic standing. This position nevertheless remains perilous, largely due to an insurmountable barrier: Turkey.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the international legitimacy of the Syrian Kurdish *People's Defence Units* (YPG) militia and its political extension the *Democratic Union Party* (PYD) between 2011 and 2022. Despite originating as Syrian fronts of the *Kurdistan Workers' Party* (PKK)—a Kurdish nationalist guerrilla and proscribed organisation in the U.S., E.U., and Turkey—the YPG/PYD were anointed as counter-terrorism partners of the Global Coalition to defeat *Daesh* (the Islamic State) after the battle for Kobani had ended in January 2015. They have ever since been celebrated in Western seats of power and press. This unusual trajectory warrants asking how the YPG/PYD's international recognition came about and developed.

The paper argues that although eliminating Daesh opened a possibility space for this "accidental" alliance (Knights and van Wilgenburg 2021), a more nuanced explanation of how the partnership between the West and the YPG/PYD emerged and evolved over time is not possible without considering these groups' legitimation strategies. Put differently, the Western interest in defeating Daesh is indispensable for understanding this relationship, but it is not exhaustive. It is

then by acknowledging the YPG/PYD's agency and foreign politics that a comprehensive understanding of their coalition with the West is attainable.

In doing so, this study seeks to make two contributions. First, it fills a gap at the nexus of comparative politics and international studies on non-state armed groups' politics of international legitimacy. Although the comparative politics literature shows a growing interest in armed groups' violent strategies and domestic governance, it pays little attention to their foreign affairs and pursuit of external recognition (Huang 2016, 92). As a result, this literature lacks some critical insights into how armed groups confront their more powerful state enemies beyond the battlefield. In international studies, armed groups have largely been sidelined in the discussions on legitimacy. Despite an upward trend in analysing these actors (see Duyvesteyn 2017; Geis, Clément, and Pfeifer 2021; Schlichte and Schneckener 2015; Podder 2017), states, and more recently International Organisations, remain the focal point of legitimacy research.

Second, the paper advances the knowledge of YPG/PYD's genesis and politics. While much has been written about the groups' military and administrative undertakings inside Syria, this paper offers a fresh approach to studying the YPG/PYD's global profile, delving into their diplomacy and outreach efforts beyond Syria's borders. This includes their engagements with policymakers and officials in Western capitals, reaching as high centres of powers as the Élysée, the official residence of the French President. The YPG/PYD offer a compelling case study not merely because of their ability to cultivate ties with an extensive range of international actors, including Russia and the European Union, but also the extent to which these ties were shaped by the groups' secular worldview. These factors set them apart from other non-state armed actors in the Middle East, like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis, which are predominantly religious and whose foreign policies are often limited to the region.

The YPG/PYD are key players in the Syrian conflict and the fate of their political project in north-east Syria will have significant ramifications for Syria, neighbouring countries, and trans-national Kurdish politics in the Middle East and beyond. Turkey's objection to Finland and Sweden joining NATO in May 2022 *inter alia* because of their support to the YPG/PYD underscores the importance of studying these groups.[56]

In this study, *legitimacy* is understood as a foreign actor's internalisation of the justifiability or utility of an armed group's existence or aspirations.[57] Yet, the interest here is not what legitimacy

[56] In response to the Turkish veto, Sweden and Finland signed a trilateral memorandum with Turkey on 28 June 2022 pledging not to support the YPG/PYD. On 30 March 2023, Turkey approved Finland's NATO accession, while Sweden's application remained pending until it was ratified by the Turkish parliament in January 2024.

[57] Legitimacy is linked to Max Weber's (1978, 212–301) conception of *domination*, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990, 123–39) idea of *symbolic capital*, and David Easton's (1975, 435–57) notion of *diffuse support*.

is, but how it is constructed—through relations and practices—in a civil war. The paper therefore deals with legitimacy as an empirical process rather than a normative or legal concept. This process can be *traced* and *observed* in armed groups' legitimation endeavours and states' reactions to them.

Legitimation is defined as an armed group's deliberate justification claims or attempts to foster in others a belief in the rightfulness or usefulness of its agenda. These claims seek to create an association relationship through which the legitimacy of an already accepted norm, value, procedure, or purpose "spreads to" the armed group itself (Zelditch 2006, 241–42). Legitimacy claims or strategies can be analytically classified into *discursive* (ideational) and *practical* (behavioural). Discursive strategies communicate what a group *is*. They emphasise the group's ideas, norms, or beliefs, which may facilitate "creating focal points for coalitions" with potential partners (Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 20). Practical strategies prove what a group *does* or *can do*. They highlight the group's capacity to fight, rule, administer, or negotiate, which may influence the perceptions and calculations of the others. Overall, legitimation claims can be sincere or manipulative, reflexive (about the self) or transitive (about the other), and normative or realist.

Differently, *recognition* is perceived here as moments, acts, or events, where an external actor expressly acknowledges or approves an armed group's conduct or authority. It is an occasion with "a publicly symbolic or declaratory force" (Beetham 1991, 18), which contributes to the group's reputability, visibility, and power. Recognition events vary in significance based on *as* and *for* what the group is recognised and *by whom*. Recognition by great powers, for instance, "carries the greatest weight and … influence on others" (Coggins 2011, 449). Also, the lack of recognition or support by neighbouring countries could pose a grave threat not only to the armed group's pursuit of international status but also its very existence. Finally, it is worth noting that armed groups are often subjected to domestic or international *de-recognition* acts or regimes. One example is *terror-listing*, which "Stigmatizes and isolates [the designated group] internationally" (*State Department* 2022).

Informed by the above conceptual notes, the paper adopts Soifer's (2012) *critical juncture* methodological approach in order to examine the causal influence of the YPG/PYD's legitimation strategies on their own recognition as members of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to defeat Daesh. Critical Junctures (e.g. the Kobani battle) are *turning points* "at which the interlocked networks of relation that preserve stability come unglued," (Ibid., 1575) allowing a significant departure from the past to occur (e.g. the U.S. partnership with YPG/PYD).

This departure is the result of a process involving *permissive* and *productive* causal conditions. Each of these conditions is *necessary*—but only together are they *sufficient*—for the outcome to

materialise. Permissive conditions are usually disruptive. They render the status quo unviable and open a "possibility space" for alternatives to emerge (Ibid.). By contrast, productive conditions are usually constructive. They close down this space by selecting or identifying the most preferred alternative.

To maximise this methodological approach's potential to reveal the causal relations of interest in this study, various data sources are incorporated. At the core of these sources are the transcripts of 21 semi-structured interviews conducted in Arabic, English, and German, between 28 July 2021 and 1 April 2022, both online—via Zoom, WhatsApp, Google Meet and phone calls—and offline in Bremen, Germany.[58] The interviewees include two European diplomats: a current high-ranking Nordic official and a former Central European advisor to the U.N.-sponsored Syria peace talks; two associates of the YPG/PYD's representation bodies in the U.S. and Europe; two activist scholars engaged in the Kurdish struggle in Central Europe; two former PKK members from Syria and Turkey; three journalists and analysts of Kurdish and Syrian affairs from Turkey, the U.S., and the Netherlands; two exiled Syrian activists: an Arab from Raqqa and a Kurd from Qamishli; four political science and international relations academics from Turkey and Central Europe; two Turkish experts on Syria based in Ankara; a British terrorism analyst; and a former European YPG volunteer.

The interview transcripts are triangulated with other Arabic, English, German, Kurmanji, Swedish, and Turkish primary and secondary sources, including rarely accessed PYD and PKK party bulletins,[59] official statements, parliamentary interpellations, media interviews, public speeches, social media discourse, as well as scholarly and news coverage of the YPG/PYD.

The paper starts with an introduction to the YPG/PYD's international standing *before* Kobani, tracing it back to their origins and politics. It then proceeds with analysing the YPG/PYD's *sole* transformative recognition event, which came out of the Kobani critical juncture. Following that is a discussion of the YPG/PYD's legitimation strategies *after* Kobani as well as their legitimacy achievements and limitations. Finally, the paper concludes with some general remarks on armed groups' international legitimacy politics.[60]

2. Before Kobani: International Scepticism of the YPG/PYD

The YPG/PYD's proclaimed self-rule in northern Syria in November 2013 buttressed their position as the region's dominant Kurdish players. Nevertheless, they remained fringe groups to

[58] All interviewees are anonymised and the letters assigned to them do not correspond to their real names.
[59] The *PYD Magazine* and the PKK's *Sawt Kurdistan* (Kurdistan Voice).
[60] Domestic legitimacy is crucial to an armed group's survival and international standing. Leaving it out of this study is a matter of scope not a statement on its importance.

outsiders.[61] At the time the YPG/PYD did not play a big role in the dynamics of the Syrian civil war. Besides, counter-terrorism and refugee policies had yet to take over the Western agenda, which focused back then on the democratic transition in Syria as manifested in the Western and Arab backing of the *Syrian National Coalition*—the opposition umbrella group.

Contrastingly, the YPG/PYD were "shunned" internationally.[62] Their ties to the PKK, antagonism to the Syrian opposition, and ambivalent relationship to the Assad regime made some Western powers "very sceptical of them."[63] Salih Muslim, then-leader of the PYD, once stated that "We are knocking on every door in the West, from the United States to the United Kingdom […] But they're not opening the door" (Lund 2014). Muslim was denied a visa to the U.S. in 2013 and 2014 (Candar 2013; Winter 2014). The U.S. State Department did not only distance itself from the PYD (Werz and Hoffman 2014, 36), it even "absolutely rejected" the idea of its participation in the Geneva talks (Zirulnick 2014). On a number of occasions, the Department condemned the YPG/PYD's "brutal tactics" and "violent suppression" of anti-Assad peaceful protests (Ventrell 2013; *State Department* 2014).[64]

To understand the Western attitude towards the YPG/PYD, the groups' origins and practices during the uprising must be considered. First of all, the *genesis* of the YPG and PYD is arguably more rooted in the Kurdish question in Turkey than in Syria. That is because they both *originated* in the PKK, the Kurdish nationalist and Marxist-Leninist party engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state since 1984 in pursuit of an independent Kurdistan[65] and later Kurdish autonomy (Marcus 2007, 76; Orton 2017, 12).[66] The PKK is designated a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S., and the E.U.

Although Syria has historically been considered an "unimportant backwater in the Kurdish struggle" (Gunter 2013, 447), the PKK's alliance, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with Hafez al-Assad, who had riparian and territorial disputes with Turkey, changed that (McDowall 1996; Tejel 2008). Sheltered in Syria and supplied with funds and training camps, the party inspired many Syrian Kurds to join its ranks. Yet, many others were alienated because the PKK did not only ignore Assad's discrimination against the Kurds, "but even denied the existence of a specifically Syrian Kurdish people or problem" (Kaya and Lowe 2017, 280). In 1998, the PKK-Assad alliance

[61] Online correspondence by the author with A, British terrorism analyst, August 30, 2021, WhatsApp.
[62] Correspondence, A, August 2021, WhatsApp.
[63] Online correspondence by the author with B, Central European academic and expert on Kurdish politics, September 7, 2021, WhatsApp.
[64] Although the U.S. is not equivalent to "Western powers," American attitudes and policies towards armed actors in Syria were largely representative, and constitutive, of Western views.
[65] In Kurdish nationalist discourse, "Kurdistan" encompasses parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.
[66] Turkish Kurds have historically suffered persecution and repression, especially under military rule.

came to an end with the *Adana Agreement* between Ankara and Damascus, after which Syria expelled the PKK's founder Abdullah Öcalan and ended the party's activities.[67]

It was a moment of crisis for the PKK, but the insurgent party managed to survive and transform its declared ideology to one based on *democratic confederalism* or *democratic autonomy* and its organisation to the trans-border "party complex" *Union of Communities of Kurdistan (KCK)* (Jongerden 2017, 256).[68] The PYD, a component of this complex, was announced on 20 September 2003 in the Qandil mountains in northern Iraq—the PKK's headquarters (*PYD Magazine* 2008, 16; Omar 2016). Murat Karayılan, a PKK co-founder, explained that the PYD—alongside other newly founded parties in Iraq and Iran—was "a practical necessity" and "a result of the requirements of the [PKK's] new ideological orientation", which imposed "the need to establish a dedicated organisation for each part" of Kurdistan (Can and Mohammed 2010, 38).

In Syria in the 2000s, the Assad regime brutally repressed the 2004 Qamishli uprising and persecuted Kurdish activists and dissidents, especially the PYD/PKK's sympathisers, some of whom were subjected to torture and extra-judicial killing (*Amnesty International* 2004). Nevertheless, instead of working together to counter the regime's brutality, the Syrian Kurdish parties remained divided. Some parties viewed the PYD as an alien and feared that it might prioritise trans-national goals over the domestic Kurdish aspirations as the PKK did before.[69] In a 2007 meeting to discuss the disagreements between the PYD and these parties, the late Issa Hesso, the PYD's representative, assured the audience that the PYD was created to defend Kurdish rights in Syria, "but we are united with the PKK, we are one organisation" *(Welate Mê* 2007). He emphasised that the creation of the PYD was part of the PKK's evolution and response to "international changes" (Ibid.). Hesso was apparently referring to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which propelled the rise of the Iraqi Kurds.[70] Still, the discord among the Syrian Kurds persisted and was further aggravated with the advent of the Syrian uprising.

A few months after Syria's pro-democracy demonstrations began in March 2011, the YPG was founded by field commander Xebat Dêrik of the *People's Defence Forces* (HPG)—the PKK's armed wing—after his reported arrival with other HPG fighters in Afrin, in northern Syria, to

[67] The following year, Öcalan was captured in Kenya while on the run and brought to trial in Turkey (see Marcus 2007, 269–85). He remains incarcerated in a high-security prison on İmralı Island to the time of writing.
[68] Despite its "unbearable vagueness" (*International Crisis Group* 2011, 22), this ideology can be understood as radical democracy built on communal self-organisation.
[69] These parties were mostly allies of Masoud Barzani's *Kurdistan Democratic Party* (KDP) in Iraq, the main Kurdish rival of the PKK.
[70] Syria was apprehensive that it would be the next target for "regime change" by the U.S. after Iraq.

establish a Kurdish military force.[71] Clandestinely, under the cover of Kurdish language classes and in unfamiliar settings like "homes" and "taxis," the founding team trained and indoctrinated small cells of nationally-awakened young Kurds (Masal 2017). Such secrecy was essential as the Assad regime's security apparatus was still in control of northern Syria. Gradually, the militant cells continued to grow and multiply. Internally, these cells identified themselves as *Kurdistan Self-Defence Units* (YXK) (Ibid.).[72] Publicly, however, they assumed different names such as the *People's Values Protection Group* (*Firat News* 2012a), *Martyr Xebat's Fighters* (*Firat News* 2012b), and *Popular Protection Committees* (*Welatê Me* 2012) until they were officially announced on 19 July 2012 as the People's Defence Units (YPG).

As the Syrian uprising progressed most young Kurdish protesters were united in expressing their anger against the state "as Syrians, not Kurds" (Zambelis 2011, 8–9) but the positions of the two major Kurdish political forces—the PYD/YPG and their rival the *Kurdish National Council* (KNC) umbrella group—diverged regarding Assad and the Syrian opposition. The KNC joined the Syrian opposition and demanded the departure of Assad. The PYD/YPG were more sceptical of the opposition and less concerned with the fate of the Syrian president.

The view of the *Carnegie Middle East Center* (2012) that the PYD was "responsible for stifling the Kurdish efforts to form a united opposition front" had been on display in the streets where the PYD steered away from anti-Assad Kurdish protests. Instead, the party organised parallel demonstrations in which the chants, slogans, and demands were exclusively Kurdish (*Serekaniye* 2011). The uprising's *Kurdification* (*ethnicization)* by the PYD in the north was somewhat reminiscent to its *Islamisation* (*sectarianisation)* by the Salafis elsewhere in Syria.

More notably, the mutation of the peaceful protests into a civil war presented the PYD/YPG, the only Kurdish factions with a guerrilla background, with an opportunity to protect and control the Kurdish-populated territories. In the process, the YPG's Kufiyah-masked militants did not only police the Kurdish streets, but also cracked down on revolutionary activists and rivals. Various Kurdish youth groups accused the PYD/YPG of kidnapping and torturing their members (Sedki and Saleh 2012; *Welatê Me* 2011) and multiple dissident KNC politicians were forcibly expelled from northern Syria or had to flee to the neighbouring Kurdistan Region of Iraq (*Kurdwatch* 2012). The PYD/YPG denied these accusations.

This behaviour fuelled a speculation that the PYD/YPG and the regime might have found a common cause, particularly after Turkey's alignment with the opposition, and Öcalan's (2011)

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[71] Online correspondence by the author with C, former PKK member, September 21, 2021, WhatsApp; Dêrik was referred to as "senior PYD member" in *Human Rights Watch*'s (2014, 37) report ,"Under Kurdish Rule"; see also (*Ronahi TV* 2014).

[72] Some unsubstantiated accounts date the initial cells of the YXK back to 2004 or to 2008.

call that “Assad should meet the PYD”. Then Carnegie Middle East Center scholar Maria Fantappie (2012) opines that the PYD was given a “carte blanche” from the regime to expand its presence from Afrin eastwards across the Turkish border. Simultaneously, other affiliated KCK formations which had been “in place years before the Syrian uprising” surfaced and activated their members and programmes (Khalaf 2016, 5).

Yet, it was on 19 July 2012 that the PYD/YPG emerged as the *de facto* rulers over most of Syria’s Kurdish-inhabited areas as they took over military check-points, roads, and key public buildings and services from the departing regime troops, who were needed to crush the uprising in Homs, Hama, and elsewhere in Syria. According to Riad Hijab, the prime minister at the time, Assad’s justification for this withdrawal and “handing over heavy weaponry and military posts to the PKK in northern Syria,” was that “these are our allies. […] We need them now to control the Kurdish street […] and to be a dagger in Turkey’s flank” (*Syria TV* 2021, [52:00]). This development, dubbed by the PYD/YPG’s supporters as the “Rojava revolution,” brought vast territories on the Turkish border under the groups’ control.

To summarise, the PYD/YPG swiftly established themselves as the rulers over most Syrian Kurds after the country plunged into civil war. The ways through which this authority was established—in particular as far as the PKK, Assad, and the peaceful protests were concerned—presented the PYD/YPG to outsiders as questionable actors that most Western powers preferred to ignore. But “Kobani would change everything.”[73]

3. Kobani: Catapulting the YPG/PYD into International Fame

The YPG/PYD’s consolidated control of the Kurdish-inhabited regions late in 2013 prompted some pundits to call on Washington to “deal with the Kurdish organizations that are helping define the reality on the ground” (Werz and Hoffman 2014, 2). Almost a year later, U.S. airpower helped these organisations to expel Daesh from a small city sitting on the Syrian-Turkish border—*Kobani*. The September 2014—January 2015 battle of Kobani was the most consequential critical juncture on the YPG/PYD’s path towards international legitimacy.[74] That is because the YPG/PYD’s recognition as partners of the U.S. and the Global Coalition refined the groups’ military capabilities, expanded their territories, and transformed their international standing.

This recognition would not have been possible in its temporal and geographic context had any of the following four inter-related causal conditions been absent: the Daesh crisis; the Obama

[73] Correspondence, A, August 2021, WhatsApp.

[74] Online correspondence by the author with D, Dutch journalist, January 12, 2022, WhatsApp; all interviewees reiterated this view.

doctrine; the "shielding denial" of ties to the PKK; and battlefield performance. The latter two are, respectively, discursive and practical legitimation claims by the YPG/PYD. That is to say, the groups' purposive justifications of "who they are" and "what they can do" contributed causally to their partnership with Western powers.

3.1. The Daesh Crisis: Disrupting the U.S. Approach to Syria

The rise of Daesh and its declaration of a caliphate in the summer of 2014 in Iraq and Syria was an unanticipated major event that disrupted the U.S.'s approach to Syria and warranted a policy change. Before that, even though the "stated" U.S. policy was that President Assad must "step aside," some U.S. officials "privately" braced themselves for the regime's victory and a consequent "lame political process" that would end the conflict (Andrew Tabler in *Hudson Institute* 2014, [25:20]). But Daesh's lightning territorial expansion and gruesome acts shattered this calculus. The U.S. president, who earlier that year had dismissed the group as a minor threat compared to al-Qaeda (Remnick 2014), was shocked by the fall of Mosul in June. After the Iraqi military's rapid collapse in the face of Daesh's offensive, Obama complained to his aides that "[w]e didn't get a warning that the Iraqis were going to melt away" (Rhodes 2018, 291).

In response, he authorised on 8 August 2014 the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) to begin bombing Daesh targets in Iraq. While a hastily assembled international alliance to counter Daesh was under way, it was clear that an aerial campaign against the group would not be enough without ground forces that would eliminate its remnants from bombarded areas. In Iraq, the U.S. partner forces—the Iraqi army and the Kurdistan Regional Government's Peshmerga security forces (from the Kurdish *pêşmerge*, "those who face death")—were already battling the extremist group. In Syria, the situation was different. The U.S. had no military allies. Therefore, Washington's options were either U.S. ground troops or local combat forces.

3.2. The Obama Doctrine: No U.S. Boots on the Ground

President Obama's pledge that "there would not be boots on the ground in Syria" (Korte 2015) took the option of deploying U.S. ground troops to fight Daesh off the table. The other option was finding a partner infantry force from the region. Thus, Washington had to choose from three possible alternatives: the Turkish army, vetted Syrian rebels, or the YPG.

It seems that the Turkish alternative was not thoroughly considered. Not merely because of the "very sour" relations between CENTCOM and Ankara, dating back to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (*Hoover Institution* 2021), but also because it was obvious that there was "a difference in priorities" between the two countries (Kirişci 2014). While Turkey viewed a regime

change in Damascus and the establishment of a no-fly zone along the Turkish-Syrian border as necessary steps for stabilising Syria and combating terrorism (*CNN* 2014), the U.S. was primarily committed to fighting Daesh. The Turkish government was not interested in this fight because it "did not want to become a target for Daesh at its height of power" and because, by September 2014, Daesh was pounding its enemies, the YPG and the PKK, in Kobani.[75] On their side, U.S. officials viewed Turkey as an enabler of Daesh through its hands-off border policy, which allowed foreign Jihadis to flow into Syria and Iraq (Ratnam 2014).

Likewise, the alternative of vetted Syrian rebels did not fare well. Although these rebels were fighting Daesh at the time—and would eventually triumph in Western Syria (Lister 2019)—the U.S. was increasingly alarmed by their radicalisation and factionalism. In addition, most Syrian rebels rejected Washington's condition that its partners should only fight Daesh and not Assad (Abdelrazek 2015). Finally, the 2013 C.I.A.'s covert programme to train and arm moderate rebel groups, known as *Timber Sycamore*, was not going successfully.[76] On one hand, Washington did not supply these groups with enough resources (Mazzetti, Goldman, and Schmidt 2017), and on the other, some of the trained rebels either fought alongside, or were defeated by, al-Qaeda's affiliate *Jabhat al-Nusra*, which had even managed to seize some U.S.-supplied arms (Hilleary 2015). This was a fiasco for the Obama administration.

Lastly, the third alternative was the YPG. It seemed a good match. The group's secular creed placed it in close proximity to the U.S. in terms of ideology and values. In addition, the group did not fight Assad and was at the time resisting Daesh in Kobani. However, the YPG's ties to the PKK were a problem, not only in the eyes of Turkey but also U.S. law. Although some U.S. officials erroneously thought that they could "sell" a possible co-operation with YPG to Turkey (Knights and van Wilgenburg 2021, 108), which was still engaged in a peace process with the PKK, this would still be legally complicated.

3.3. Shielding Denial of PKK ties: A Discursive Self-legitimation of the YPG/PYD

The PKK was a proscribed group in the U.S. and in most of the member states of the Global Coalition against Daesh. Therefore, in order to partner with the YPG/PYD, these countries had to base such a partnership on the premise that the "PYD is a different group than the PKK legally" (Harf 2014). This proposition—and, thus, the partnership per se—would not have been

[75] Turkish expert on Syria based in Ankara, WhatsApp call with author, August 27, 2021.

[76] The operation, which began in 2012 and would continue until 2017, was not a serious effort against Assad. Then C.I.A. director who approved it, David Petraeus, stated at the time that this programme "*won't change the direction of the war, […] it will allow us to build relationships with the opposition*" (Rhodes 2018, 197).

imaginable if the YPG/PYD had themselves publicly acknowledged their ties to the PKK. In other words, public and on-the-record denial of their PKK ties (Knights and van Wilgenburg 2021, 38) was necessary for the YPG/PYD to shield their reputation and keep their options to work with the West open, and specifically in the U.S., so that the Pentagon could formally recognise them as partners without violating the law (Ibid.).

Whether such denial really convinced the U.S. and other would-be partners is another matter. A U.S. official recalled, "We accepted the difference between the PKK and YPG, knowing it was an artificial one, but for expediency reasons" (Ibid.). In fact, prior to sealing this partnership, the YPG/PYD's affiliations to the PKK were acknowledged in several official U.S. statements (see Kerry 2014) and documents (see *U.S. NCTC* 2014).[77] This changed after the admission of the YPG/PYD to the Global Coalition, as Western officials started to maintain "the illusion of a distinction between the PKK and the PYD" in order to keep the legitimacy of the anti-Daesh coalition intact (Balanche 2018, 3).

In a further step, described as "linguistic acrobatics," (Esch et al. 2018), the Pentagon instructed the YPG to re-brand itself to obscure its ties to the PKK (*Reuters* 2017). This resulted in the creation of the *Syrian Democratic Forces* (SDF), the YPG-led multi-ethnic force, which became the Global Coalition's boots on the ground. In line with the changing official Western narrative, media outlets like the BBC replaced statements such as "YPG is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)" (Gatehouse 2014) with "Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK)" (*BBC Monitoring* 2016). So, instead of being a factual account or descriptive statement, the YPG's links to the PKK became a Turkish claim or viewpoint (Teke 2020, 40).

Nevertheless, the YPG/PYD's disavowal of the PKK did not start in Kobani. It has been a consistent claim by the groups since 2011. The YPG/PYD sought to shield themselves from the banishment and demonisation associated with the "terrorist" label. The real or alleged autonomy from the PKK was a means for the YPG/PYD to emphasise their Syrian agenda in order to gain support among the Syrian Kurds and abroad. Salih Muslim's assertion that the PYD and PKK are independent "brother organizations, which respect each other" (Kaya and Lowe 2017, 277), and the senior PYD official Aldar Khalil's (2017) *Foreign Policy* op-ed "Syria's Kurds Are Not the PKK," are but some examples of the YPG/PYD's endeavours to mystify the nature of their ties to the PKK. This mystification is further perpetuated by partisan statements, Western media reports, and activist and nationalist scholarship. This denial shielded the YPG/PYD, making their partnership

[77] In January 2018, the C.I.A. website listed the PYD as the PKK's "Syrian wing" (see Hawez 2018). The entry was later deleted.

with the U.S. and its allies legally possible. Yet, for this partnership to be authorised, a final necessary condition was needed.

3.4. Battlefield Performance: A Practical Self-legitimation of the YPG/PYD

The Pentagon's decision to partner with the YPG was not to be sealed until the group had proved its mettle, showing an ability to co-ordinate effectively with U.S. special forces and other battlefield advisors. U.S. Special Operations troops stationed in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq had already taken note of the YPG's confrontation with Daesh in Syria as well as the YPG/PKK's successful rescue of thousands of Ezidis (also commonly written as Yezidis) in Iraq's Sinjar region from a looming massacre by Daesh in August 2014.[78] Still, the U.S. military was not sure about the group's effectiveness as a counter-terrorism partner.

This scepticism was indicated by the initial pessimistic evaluations of the situation in Kobani after launching the U.S. airstrikes against Daesh on 27 September, which did not seem to halt the group's advance to seize the entire city. Several U.S. officials estimated that "Kobani will soon fall to ISIS" and Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby lamented that "we don't have a willing, capable, effective partner on the ground inside Syria right now – it's just a fact" (Yan, Levs, and Labott 2014).

Still, the gallant resistance of the fighters of the YPG and its all-female counter-part, the Women's Defence Units (YPJ, from the Kurdish *Yekîneyên Parastina Jinê*), did not cease until Kobani was liberated. It was a major success that made international headlines and persuaded the U.S. military that it had found a capable ally in Syria. In contrast to previous partnering experiences in Afghanistan and elsewhere, U.S. special forces found the YPG fighters to be more disciplined, efficient, and safer to work with. Accordingly, the YPG/PYD were formally recognised as partners of the U.S. army. As a senior U.S. official put it, 'In terms of direct partnership, Kobane *was* the event" (Knights and van Wilgenburg 2021, 44).

This partnership would continue even after the destruction of Daesh's territorial caliphate in March 2019, in Baghuz, Syria. Whereas seven U.S. soldiers were killed in action on the way to rid north-east Syria of the extremist group, eleven thousand YPG/SDF soldiers lost their lives (Ibid., 177). The liberated areas, including Arab-majority regions in Deir Ezzor, Hasaka, and Raqqa were annexed to the YPG/PYD's autonomous region (Allsopp and van Wilgenburg 2019, 19),

[78] The Ezidis (Yezidis), an ethnoreligious minority indigenous to northern Iraq, were systematically targeted by ISIS for genocide and enslavement on the pretext of their purported adherence to polytheism. For more, see Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's (2021) *The Daughters of Kobani*.

and tens of thousands of captured Daesh fighters and their families were put in prisons and detention camps there.

The triumph in Kobani not only contributed to the YPG/PYD's recognition as Western armies' comrades in arms, it also revolutionised their international public image. Unlike other armed groups, which struggle to "overcome the delegitimizing effects of [their] violence" (Schlichte 2009, 180), the YPJ/YPG's coercive power was internationally celebrated and legitimised as its war against Daesh was framed as an Armageddon between civilisation and barbarism. The ability of young secular women and men to turn an almost inevitable defeat against a cruel and ruthless group into a victory broadcasted in real-time on TV won the YPJ/YPG the admiration of many and propelled them into international stardom. The role of female fighters in particular caught the Western world's attention and was extensively discussed, often in sensationalist and Orientalist reports (Dirik 2014).

To conclude, the four necessary causal conditions outlined in this section—including two different legitimation strategies by the YPG/PYD—were *collectively* sufficient at the Kobani critical juncture to give rise to the groups' most significant international recognition: becoming military partners of the West against Daesh.[79] This partnership would transform the YPG/PYD's post-Kobani pursuit of international standing and legitimacy.

4. After Kobani: The YPG/PYD's Enhanced Legitimation

Fighting alongside the world's strongest military and aided by a favourable Western media reporting, the YPG/PYD strived to extend the recognition of their counter-terrorism mission to their political project—the *Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES). Not only did the YPG/PYD's post-Kobani legitimacy claims seek to foster their image as secular, democratic, feminist, and professional political partners but they also sought to de-legitimise their state enemy, Turkey, as an adversary to the West and a sponsor of terrorism.

4.1. Identifying with Western Values

There is strong empirical evidence that the YPG/PYD's international success after Kobani is partly attributable to their "awareness of what appeals to the West," and "ability to make use of

[79] Returning to Soifer's terminology, *the Daesh crisis* was a "permissive" causal condition, while *the Obama doctrine*, *shielding denial of PKK ties*, and *battlefield performance* were "productive" ones. In line with his emphasis that "a complete statement of any critical juncture account contains equifinality," (Soifer 2012, 1573 and 1582–84), I argue that *equifinality* is not a concern here because the Pentagon's partnership with the YPG/PYD was a very rare, rather than a likely, phenomenon.

the themes of secularism, feminism, and democracy, which are very popular" there.[80] In the midst of Western frustration with failed revolutions, chaos, and the rise of violent extremists in the Middle East, the YPG/PYD emerged as "a light in the middle of the darkness."[81] The West was desperately looking for the good guy, and the YPG/PYD reacted: "That is us. And we are like you anyway."[82] These accounts were corroborated by a high-ranking Nordic diplomat who reflected on his government's engagement with the YPG/PYD and stated that "they claim to be running some sort of multi-ethnic, secular, democratic, feminist project, why don't we talk to them? If they had a political programme like that of Daesh, we would not have communicated with them the same way … [but] their programme makes us comfortable and supportive."[83]

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, identifying with liberal values of democracy and human rights has indeed become a common practice for those who aspire to generate legitimacy in the international realm, as respecting these norms "was integrated in the guidelines of *rightful conduct* of states" (Charlesworth and Coicaud 2010, 61, emphasis added). Therefore, in articulating their claims and demands within these guidelines, the YPG/PYD made it clear that they are united with the West not only against common enemies but also around common values and principles. Signing an action plan with the U.N. in July 2019 to end the recruitment of child soldiers demonstrated the groups' awareness that observing international law can earn them "a medal of *good citizenship* in the long run" (Jo 2015, 65, emphasis added).[84]

To the YPG/PYD's supporters, the AANES is an emancipatory project that represents "a post-nationalist framework" for a secular, ecological, and feminist society (Sarvan 2016, 8). In line with the AANES's progressive Social Contract, which guarantees gender-balanced leadership positions at all levels, it is unmistakable that women play a prominent role in the YPG/PYD's civilian and military affairs.[85]

In addition, the Administration's institutional commitment to freedom of belief and minority rights was signalled by the Bureau of Religions and Beliefs, which is chaired by representatives of Yezidism, Christianity, and Islam (Pierret and Alrefaai 2021). The YPG/PYD's claim to inclusivity and representativeness went beyond religions to encompass different ethnic

[80] Online correspondence by the author with E, Beirut-based American journalist, August 23, 2021, WhatsApp.
[81] Online correspondence by the author with F, England-based Turkish international relations lecturer, January 7, 2022, Zoom.
[82] Correspondence, A, August 2021, WhatsApp.
[83] Online correspondence by the author with G, high-ranking Nordic diplomat, April 1, 2022, Zoom.
[84] According to the *U.S. State Department* (2021, 36), the YPG/SDF forces continued to recruit children even after the 2019 agreement.
[85] Article 87 of the Social Contract stipulates that the "proportion of the representation of both genders in all institutions, administrations and bodies is of at least 40%" (*The Kurdish Institute* 2014).

communities in north-east Syria. This can be witnessed in the evolution of the official name of the groups' polity from the ethnic Kurdish *Rojava* in 2013 to the impartial and Syrianised *Autonomous Administration* in 2018.[86]

It is barely disputable that, in comparison to the territories governed by Assad or by Salafi groups, the YPG/PYD's rule appeared more participatory and resonant with Western governments and press (see Enzinna 2015). Yet, it could be argued that, while uncritical media reporting has re-produced the YPG/PYD's positive self-representations, it has also undermined their political experiment by abandoning the journalistic role of holding the ruling groups to account. Largely absent in Western press were references to other Kurdish groups when the YPG/PYD were exclusively, and imprecisely, referred to as *the* Syrian Kurds. Also missing were discussions of the YPG/PYD's human rights violations (see *Amnesty International* 2015), persecution of political rivals, and contradictions between the rhetoric of bottom-up democracy and the practice of top-down imposition of policies on local populations (Netjes and Erwin 2021, 38–43; Tsurkov and al-Hassan 2019). For philosophy scholar Michiel Leezenberg (2016, 683), "the Rojava experiment, for all its proclaimed anarchism and grass-roots mobilization, reproduces both the PKK's Leninist party vanguardism, and its Stalinist personality cult" (see also Dinc 2020).

4.2. Diplomacy and Activism

The YPG/PYD's "good understanding"[87] of diplomacy has helped them to showcase that they are not merely fighters but also professional politicians and activists. To the Nordic diplomat I interviewed, the YPG/PYD's representatives whom he met were "deeply moral, deeply engaged" interlocutors who "appeared to be strongly committed to a greater cause rather than transactional politics."[88] Besides, the groups' external outreach efforts served to bolster their demands and discredit their rivals.

The YPG/PYD's diplomatic work inside Syria is co-ordinated by the AANES's *Foreign Relations Commission*. The polity's top diplomat is arguably Ilham Ahmed,[89] who has been hosted by the likes of President Emmanuel Macron of France, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov of Russia, then foreign minister Ann Linde of Sweden, and Assad regime's National Security Bureau director Ali Mamlouk of Syria. Ahmed joined the PKK in 1998 and was then a member of its affiliated organisations in Syria—the feminist *Union Star* and community-organising *TEV DEM*—before

[86] In 2016, this region was named the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.
[87] Correspondence, A, August 2021, WhatsApp.
[88] Correspondence, G, April 2022, Zoom.
[89] Salih Muslim, the PYD's former leader, played this role in the preceding years.

joining the PYD, and after 2015, co-chairing the *Syrian Democratic Council*, the political wing of the SDF (see *International Crisis Groups* 2017, 7).

Diplomacy and activism of the YPG/PYD in Europe are dovetailed by the AANES representation offices, a network of affiliated cultural and human rights organisations such as the *Kurdish Institute of Brussels*, Kurdish diaspora, progressive activists, and sympathetic European politicians, particularly those of Kurdish origin or leftist ideology. In Germany, for instance, the Left party (*Die Linke*) is a strong advocate for the YPG/PYD.[90] This constellation of actors helped the YPG/PYD become "very clever in engaging local political actors in European countries and building a constituency for themselves."[91]

The International Conference on the EU, Turkey, the Middle East and the Kurds, organised annually at the European Parliament is an example of a diplomatic activity where the YPG/PYD's views and demands gain more visibility and resonance.[92] In their discussions with Western interlocutors, the groups' representatives put forward various demands including: formal recognition of the AANES and its inclusion in the U.N.-sponsored Geneva talks and Constitutional Committee, condemnation of Turkey's military operations in north-east Syria, repatriation of European Daesh prisoners and families, and humanitarian assistance.[93] Whereas the YPG/PYD's diplomats distance the AANES from the PKK, they occasionally request the proscribed group's removal from the European terrorist list, citing its role in fighting Daesh in Kobani and saving the Ezidis of Sinjar in 2014.

The YPG/PYD's leading diplomatic representation in the U.S. is the *U.S. Mission of the Syrian Democratic Council*, registered since at least 2018 as a foreign agent with the U.S. Department of Justice.[94] In 2020 and 2021 the mission worked with two lobbying firms—i.e. AF International and Jim Dornan Strategies—to elicit support from U.S. legislators, NGOs, and media outlets (Pecquet 2021). In addition, the YPG/PYD's success as counter-terrorism partners rendered U.S. officials and departments tasked with eradicating Daesh, the groups' most fervent supporters and advocates in Washington. Examples are the former chief counter-Daesh diplomat Brett McGurk and Central Command (CENTCOM).

[90] Online correspondence by the author with H, activist scholar engaged in the Kurdish struggle, February 9, 2022, Zoom (see also Akbulut 2019).
[91] Online correspondence by the author with I, veteran Turkish journalist and analyst of Kurdish affairs, September 4, 2021, WhatsApp.
[92] The conference is organised by the EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), a consortium of human rights organisations.
[93] Telephone conversation by the author with J, associate of the AANES in Central Europe, March 2, 2022.
[94] See the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) document of the U.S. Mission of the Syrian Democratic Council (*U.S. Department of Justice* 2018).

Capitalising on this reservoir of institutional support—and in tandem with affiliated organisations such as the *Washington Kurdish Institute* and the Washington office of the Turkish Kurdish *Peoples' Democratic Party* (HDP)[95]—the YPG/PYD managed to establish close ties with different elites, lobbies, and think-tanks. In contrast to Europe, where the YPG/PYD cultivated ties with the political left, their Washington-based allies are more right-wing groups such as the Foundation for Defence of Democracies (FDD) and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. On Capitol Hill, the groups have also secured the backing of "a very strong group of senators and congressmen."[96] Generally, the demands by the YPG/PYD of the Americans are more or less the same as those of the Europeans but with a greater emphasis on the need for the U.S. to maintain its military presence in Syria and to work with Russia to broker a deal between the YPG/PYD and the Assad regime.

4.3. De-legitimation of Turkey

The YPG/PYD might be the world's only armed autonomist movement whose principal opponent is not their home country's government, but a neighbouring one—the Turkish government. Although the research interviews did not reveal a clear-cut link between the de-legitimation of Turkey and the YPG/PYD's global profile, it is plausible to assume that undermining the image of a certain state is *by itself* an addition to its rival armed group's pursuit of external legitimacy. This is because legitimacy is inherently relational and often a zero-sum competition in which a loss for actor X is a gain for its opponent Y. Therefore, to comprehensively understand an armed group's legitimacy politics, it is crucial to include its state opponent in the picture.

In her 2017 *Washington Post* op-ed, Ilham Ahmed (2017) condemned the Turkish bombing of a YPG facility in northern Syria and warned that "Turkey is not a true ally of the United States." If it had been, she argued, Turkey would not have turned "a blind eye to terrorism," and would have sought to "destroy al-Qaeda," in Idlib instead of the YPG. By contrasting the "democratic, egalitarian and progressive" AANES to Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's "totalitarian state", Ahmed invoked three of the four major tropes that the YPG/PYD seek to constantly associate with their enemy (Ibid.). Accordingly, the West should perceive the Turkish state as: 1) not an ally, 2) a perpetrator of genocides and ethnic cleansings (see Abdi 2019; Mahmoud 2021), 3) totalitarian, and 4) a sponsor of extremism and terrorism (see Bedran Çiya Kurd in *Fight for*

[95] HDP comes from the Turkish *Halkarın Demokratik Partisi*.
[96] Correspondence, I, September 2021, WhatsApp.

Humanity 2020 [22:40]; Hassan Koçer in *Ronahi TV* 2021; Shami 2021). The last is the most robust and varied anti-Turkish discourse whose resonance is accentuated by the ongoing war on Daesh.

Although the YPG/PYD's resources are not comparable to those of the Turkish state, it was clear that Turkey had a major problem in the public relations competition with these groups. For journalist Patrick Cockburn (2020, 279-290), "Turkey has lost the diplomatic and propaganda wars". Several reasons could account for that. One of them is that the YPG/PYD's portrayals of Turkey echoed and amplified widely held Western views about the Erdogan government's ambivalence to extremists, defiance of Western interests, human rights violations and authoritarian rule (see McGurk 2019; Wright 2019).

5. The YPG/PYD's Fluctuating International Legitimacy

In 2011, the YPG/PYD were practically political nobodies. A decade later, they had ruled, for a time, approximately a third of Syria's territory, partnered with Western militaries, and their leaders had become global celebrities (see *Arab News* 2021). Thanks primarily to their battlefield performance against Daesh as well as their shielding denial of ties to the PKK, a formal alliance with Western armies was made possible. The U.S. was instrumental in that regard.[97] The considerable symbolic capital that the YPG/PYD successfully accumulated among some Western governments and publics is likely to remain for the foreseeable future regardless of the political or military developments in Syria.

The empirical evidence suggests that the YPG/PYD's post-Kobani identification with Western values, diplomacy, and activism have contributed to solidify their partnership with the West. As the British terrorism expert I interviewed put it, this groups "reaped a great benefit from appearing as liberal democrats after 2014, which had not been there before that."[98] This suggestion is congruent with my analysis of the battle of Kobani as a critical juncture, which highlighted the causal relevance of some of the YPG/PYD's legitimation strategies to their international standing.

Yet, this is neither to say that legitimacy claims are, on their own, what precipitated the YPG/PYD's recognition nor that the Western interest in counter-terrorism took a back seat to such claims. It is rather to argue that, although eliminating Daesh was what opened the space for the partnership between the West and the YPG/PYD, a comprehensive understanding of how this partnership emerged and persisted is not possible without analysing the YPG/PYD's discursive (who they are) and practical (what they do) legitimation strategies. Countering terrorism

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[97] Some European capitals based their recognition of the YPG/PYD as counter-terrorism partners and progressive interlocutors on Washington's partnership with them.

[98] Correspondence, A, August 2021, WhatsApp.

alone cannot fully explain why the U.S. declined to partner with Turkey or the Syrian rebels already fighting Daesh. It also cannot explain the different levels of support for the YPG/PYD by their Western partners.

5.1. Transactional and Quasi-Official Recognition

The YPG/PYD's recognition as U.S. partners opened the doors to uneven degrees of recognition of them by Western countries that fell short of official recognition of their polity—the AANES.[99] The U.S. has ostensibly been careful to keep its transactional recognition of the YPG/PYD confined to the fight against Daesh. Beyond that, there were instances where this recognition was effectively withdrawn. A case in point is President Donald Trump's October 2019 decision to pull U.S. troops out of northern Syria while a Turkish military intervention was underway. Russia nearly did the same in January 2018 as Turkish and opposition forces wrested Afrin from the YPG/PYD. Nonetheless, both Washington and Moscow have maintained good relations with the groups.

While the U.S. is the guarantor of the AANES's survival, its diplomatic recognition of the YPG/PYD has been eclipsed by that of Nordic countries and others such as France. The latter's reception of the YPG/PYD representatives at the Élysée Palace in Paris was a huge symbolic upgrade of the groups' international status. It was nonetheless a low-cost act for the French. Similarly, Sweden viewed the YPG/PYD as "the legitimate voices on the ground" in northern Syria and advocated for their inclusion in the peace talks (Linde 2021). Still, Sweden and others have shied away from conferring an official status on the groups or their representation offices. "Some states do not officially recognise the YPG, but act as if it was officially recognised."[100] On the other hand, countries like Germany and the United Kingdom evinced an ambivalent stance towards the YPG/PYD, with Germany maintaining a more restrained posture vis-à-vis the groups.[101]

The reasons for these varying degrees of recognition can be found in disparities between European states in their domestic political landscape as well as their normative and strategic priorities that the YPG/PYD's legitimation strategies seek to align with or influence. Multiple factors—including national interests, ideological character of the governing party or political

[99] Although the YPG/PYD do not seek statehood for the AANES and, thus, cannot be recognised as a formal polity, Western countries could have for instance conferred a (semi-)diplomatic status on AANES representation offices on their soil, just as the U.S. did with the Syrian opposition in 2014. For more details, see Paul Lewis's (2014) news report.

[100] Online correspondence by the author with K, Turkish expert on Syria, August 27, 2021, WhatsApp.

[101] Online voice call, A, British terrorism analyst, Aug. 2021, WhatsApp; interview, H, scholar-activist, Feb. 2022, Zoom.

system, political weight of the hosted Kurdish diaspora, and nature of the relationship with Turkey—could condition the interactions between the YPG/PYD, on the one hand, and (would-be) supportive states on the other. France, for example, is home to vibrant Armenian and Kurdish communities and has historically been tolerant of the PKK's presence on its soil. On top of the French-Turkish geopolitical competition in the eastern Mediterranean region, Libya, and elsewhere, Paris has increasingly viewed Ankara through "the prism of civilizational and identity politics" (Cagaptay 2021, 103; see also Yavuz 2021, 289). Hence, according to some, France's honorary recognition of the YPG/PYD was partly meant to undermine Turkey's interests.[102]

5.2. Turkey: The YPG/PYD's Insurmountable Legitimacy Barrier?

The official external recognition of the AANES has been hampered by different barriers such as the groups' paradoxical demand for formal diplomatic status even though they do not seek to break away from Syria (see Christou 2021). "We can't recognise anything that is not a state," remarked the Nordic diplomat I spoke with.[103] Additionally, formal recognition of the AANES would be a deviation from U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254. Passed in 2015, the resolution describes a roadmap to end the Syrian conflict in which the conflicting parties are *exclusively* "the Syrian government" and "the opposition," neither of which the YPG/PYD belong to.[104]

Beyond these procedural constraints, there was unanimity among the interviewees that Turkey stands as the ultimate blocker of the YPG/PYD' international legitimacy. No Western country has, so far, been willing to officially recognise the groups and thereby risk its interests or its political and economic relations with Turkey.

Turkey's most significant de-recognition acts against the YPG/PYD were its military interventions in northern Syria between 2016 and 2019 alongside Syrian Islamist militias (*Reuters* 2022).[105] These interventions cleared Daesh from the region and terminated the YPG/PYD's aspiration of ruling a contiguous territory. Amnesty International (2018) accused Turkish-backed Syrian militias of committing "serious human rights abuses against civilians" while the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020) called on "Turkish authorities to respect international law" and to ensure that these abuses are halted.

Diplomatically, Turkey—with the Syrian opposition—has effectively "vetoed" the YPG/PYD's participation in several diplomatic venues around the conflict, including the Astana

[102] Online voice call, K, Turkish expert on Syria, Aug. 2021, WhatsApp; interview, H, scholar-activist, Feb. 2022, Zoom.
[103] Correspondence, G, April 2022, Zoom.
[104] U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, S/RES/2254. Available at http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2254.
[105] Turkish drones occasionally targeting YPG/PYD's members and locations in north-east Syria.

process, Geneva talks, and the Constitutional Committee.[106] The Turkish government leverages its membership in regional and international organisations to promote its views of the groups as terrorists. Ankara has even attempted to use inter-governmental security structures, such as the International Criminal Police Organisation (Interpol), to arrest the YPG/PYD's leaders (*DW* 2018).

Despite its turbulent relations with the West, it seems that Turkey has so far managed to keep official European or American recognition of the YPG/PYD as a red line. Furthermore, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has breathed new life into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and it remains to be seen how this development will impact Turkish-Western relations in the long term and, consequently, the YPG/PYD's Western support and territorial control in Syria.[107] Hints can be seen in Turkey's attempts to block Sweden and Finland from joining NATO unless they cease their support for the groups (see Henley 2022).[108]

Ultimately, the YPG/PYD's saga of international rise could have been exemplary for legitimacy-seeking non-state armed actors but for the prospect that, ceteris paribus, Turkey's opposition to the groups is likely to outlast or outdo their Western support. The tale thus becomes one about how a neighbouring country's de-recognition of an armed group could outweigh the impact of a superpower's recognition of that group. That is what may happen *if* the former is strategic, long-lasting, and well-resourced while the latter is tactical, transient, and limited. This situation underscores the primacy of regional dynamics in shaping international legitimacy of armed groups.

6. Conclusion

This paper has thoroughly analysed the YPG/PYD's most transformative recognition event—their partnership with the U.S. army. Such recognition could not have been possible without a causal process triggered by the Western interest in defeating Daesh and facilitated by the YPG/PYD's discursive and practical legitimation strategies: the shielding denial of ties to the PKK and battlefield performance, respectively.

As comrades in arms of Western powers, the YPG/PYD sought to extend the legitimacy of their counter-terrorism mission to their political project. The groups' identification with

[106] Telephone call by the author with L, Central European advisor to the U.N.-sponsored Syria peace talks, February 23, 2022; other interviewees confirmed this information.

[107] Amid Western sanctions against Russia, Ankara has maintained good ties with Moscow. The developments in Russian-Turkish relations can also significantly impact the reality on the ground in northern Syria.

[108] After third-party mediation and negotiations that addressed Turkey's security concerns, Ankara ultimately approved Finland and Sweden's applications to join NATO.

Western values and their diplomacy and activism contributed to their perceptions as credible and competent political interlocutors with whom several Western leaders have openly and enthusiastically engaged with. The YPG/PYD achieved varying degrees of diplomatic recognition and an overall remarkable international status. The latter, nevertheless, remains perilous largely due to the groups' insurmountable legitimacy barrier—Turkey.

Whereas de-legitimation of Turkey featured prominently in the YPG/PYD's claim-making processes, Ankara's de-recognition of the groups seems likely to undo or outlive their Western support. This study has thus underlined that maintaining cordial relations with neighbouring countries is a huge asset for armed groups in their quest for international legitimacy.

The paper's causal analysis could have benefited from more detailed counterfactuals to the conditions underpinning the 2014/15 Kobani juncture as well as incorporating other transformative recognition events, which the YPG/PYD clearly lacked.

Moving from this case study to armed groups in general, three elements stand out in this research for both their impact on the YPG/PYD's legitimacy and their potential for cross-case relevance: first, an armed group's effectiveness on the battlefield; second, its identification with norms and values associated with rightful conduct and good citizenship in the international realm (currently, Western liberal values); and third, the group's regional standing.

Ultimately, it is well established that a major power's attitude towards an armed group is largely a function of the bilateral relations between that power and the state opponent of the armed group. However, how armed groups *affect* inter-state relations remains largely overlooked. Therefore, a promising research agenda could be how an armed group influences bilateral or multilateral relations among regional and global powers. One example is how the YPG/PYD left their mark on the Turkish-American or the Turkish-Swedish relationship.

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Paper No. 2

Recognition on Their Own Terms?

The Dilemma of the Taliban's Doctrine in International Politics

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The Taliban's return to power in 2021 marked the emergence of the sole jihadi nationalist government on the world stage, with which some major powers interact or have considerable diplomatic relations. As a de facto state actor, the Taliban actively seek external recognition of their rule. However, they enact policies that hinder this very goal. This chapter explores this apparent paradox, arguing that the Taliban desire the benefits of international legitimacy but only on their own terms, unwilling to compromise what they consider to be their identity and religious beliefs. The chapter examines the insurgent Taliban's legitimating ideas and practices, as well as the role of regional support and the global context in their return to power. It further analyses the internal barriers and external opportunities that will likely shape the Taliban's quest for official status in international politics as they navigate a precarious path between normalisation in the region and isolation from the West.

1. Introduction

The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan on 15 August 2021 was a startling moment in international politics. It came two decades after the overthrow of their government—*the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*—by US and auxiliary Afghan forces in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks. As the current rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban actively seek normalisation in the international system. Nonetheless, many of their policies and edicts—especially those related to foreign militants on Afghan soil, inclusive governance and human rights—create considerable barriers to this normalisation. What explains this paradox on the Taliban's side: seeking international legitimacy while simultaneously undermining the likelihood of its attainment?

This chapter offers an answer to this question. It argues that this apparent contradiction is resolved by acknowledging that the Taliban do not seek international recognition as a top strategic objective. Instead, they seek recognition only on their own terms and not at any cost. Put differently, the Taliban are cognisant of the perks of external legitimacy and desire them, but not at the expense of their distinctive identity and religious beliefs. Therefore, the Taliban are likely to shun requirements or pre-conditions for upgrading their international status if these are deemed

detrimental to their worldview or ideological purity. This is not to suggest that the Taliban are not calculating actors. Rather, it is to emphasise that the group's practical reckoning and political priorities are often defined by the sanctity they accord to their value system. As such, a better understanding of the Taliban is possible when their value or belief commitments are factored into the analysis of their policy motivations and preferences.

What this text shows is that unlike most other armed groups, which struggle to adapt their legitimacy claims when addressing disparate domestic and international audiences, the Taliban seem to have relieved themselves of this dilemma. Since their inception, they have anchored their legitimating ideas and practices in what they perceive as true Islam and Afghan identity. Islamic and jihadi legitimacy, among their foot soldiers and the local population, has consistently remained their top priority. According to Anas Haqqani, a senior Taliban leader, the essence of legitimacy in Afghanistan is "religious credibility"; therefore, the Taliban have "the strongest … religious and popular legitimacy" (Jalal Foundation, 2023: 26).

At first glance, one might assume that the Taliban are just another armed group whose domestic and international legitimacy are at odds. However, a closer look suggests otherwise, as there is no indication that the Afghan population at large opposes any of the international demands for the Taliban to form an inclusive government or guarantee the right to education and employment for women. The contradiction, when it does arise, is often between the Taliban's internal (among staff, fighters, and supporters) and foreign legitimacy. On multiple occasions, the group's current *Amir* (supreme leader) Hibatullah Akhundzada has warned the international community that "I will not move even one step with you or interact with you … at the cost of this Sharia" (Gul, 2023) and assured his followers that "We pledged to Allah … [to] refrain from taking any action that endangers, undermines Islam" (*Tolo News*, 2023).

The Taliban believe that international recognition is their lawful entitlement based on their 'effective control' of Afghan territory. In contrast, many international actors consider recognising other governments a discretionary political decision aimed at advancing their foreign policy objectives (Peterson 1997, 3). Consequently, it can be argued that the international fortunes of the Taliban—and for that matter the fortunes of any legitimacy-seeking armed group—hinge not only on their domestic position of power but also on external engagements and deliberations that take into account the interests and values of foreign actors. In this light, the Taliban's international trajectory is a blend of triumphs and setbacks.

On the one hand, the Taliban's success on the domestic front was comprehensive. Within enabling regional and historical developments, the group's self-legitimating rhetoric and actions remained remarkably consistent. The insurgent Taliban (2001–2021) portrayed themselves as

defenders of Afghan honour, culture and religion against the corruption and injustice of foreign-imposed rule. For many Taliban fighters, the ideological contrast with Western enemies turned the battlefield into a sacred space where the fault lines between good and evil were clearly demarcated. These fighters harboured no doubts about the righteousness of their resistance, and hence, the war did not cease until they had out-governed the Western-backed Kabul regime and out-lived the US military occupation.

That is, the Taliban's rebellion continued until they restored their unrivalled authority over Afghanistan in 2021. This on-the-ground reality left states with interests in the country—e.g. counterterrorism, trade or humanitarian relief—with no other choice but to engage with the group. Indeed, there is an implicit international consensus that the Taliban are in control and there is currently no alternative to them. At least for the present time, the foreign players' perception that replacing the Taliban regime could exacerbate Afghanistan's problems is a substantial, albeit incomplete, legitimacy achievement for the group. Although seizing the seat of government in Kabul was not sufficient for the Taliban to secure official international recognition, it was *sine qua none* for their claim to be the rightful governing authority in the country. Understandably then, the longer the Taliban government remains in firm control, the better their prospects for eventual official recognition by other nations.

On the other hand, now that they are in power, the Taliban's performance on the external front is at best oscillating. Ideological commitments that served the group well on the battlefield are a source of contention in the international corridors of power. The group's normative agenda—as manifested in their governance and proclamations—does not align with security and moral considerations of various major Western and regional actors. The Taliban's internal negotiations between the *strategists* (who favour having working relations with the world) and the *doctrinaires* (who do not prioritise such relations) have accentuated these challenges.[109] Despite the Taliban's pledge not to let Afghanistan be a base for groups that threaten others, their continued provision of shelter for foreign militant groups is alarming, especially to neighbouring countries. Moreover, what outsiders consider essential for maintaining long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan, such as establishing a broad-based government, was dismissed by the Taliban as irreconcilable with the doctrinal purity and sovereignty of their government.

To this point, it is important to emphasise this chapter's underpinning guidelines. First, to circumvent orientalist and Western-centric readings of the Taliban, this enquiry is centred on the group's own statements instead of the others' portrayals of them. Second, the Taliban's ideas and

[109] This classification is simplistic and imprecise. It means to reflect issue-based differentiations rather than universal outlooks or stable wings within the Taliban.

beliefs are consolidated, yet they remain susceptible to incremental evolution under conducive circumstances. For instance, the group's second Emirate (2021–present) has relaxed some social restrictions that were imposed during the first Emirate (1996–2001), such as lifting the internet ban and abolishing punishments for non-bearded men. Furthermore, the Taliban's developing political rhetoric towards neighbouring countries, once marked by threats and hostility in the 1990s, suggests their capacity to change and learn from history. Third, this research is concerned not with the Taliban's genuine beliefs, but rather with what they *claim* to believe. Lastly, the Taliban are a multi-faceted actor. Their political behaviour is not only a reaction to external dilemmas but also an outcome of internal deliberations among different sub-groups of members and leaders, whose positions reflect varying shades of dogmatism and politicisation. Although the *Shura* (consultation) is a crucial part of the Taliban's decision-making processes, the Amir is the ultimate and final arbiter of power.

This study is primarily informed by ten expert interviews conducted online and in-person between October 2022 and February 2023; primary sources of the Taliban's discourse, such as public pronouncements and the online Arabic magazine *al-Somood* (steadfastness or resilience); and non-Western analyses of the group, such as Mawlawi Hafizullah Haqqani's (1997) *Taliban: From the Mullah's Dream to the Believers' Emirate*. It additionally draws on primary governmental statements, secondary sources, as well as Western scholarly and media coverage of the Afghan conflict and the Taliban.

The insurgent Taliban's triumphant odyssey between 2001 and 2023 was unusual in some ways. Most remarkable was that the group's perseverance over two decades against the world's most powerful military reached a point where the US was compelled to shift from "we will never negotiate with terrorists to we must negotiate with terrorists" (*PBS NewsHour*, 2021: [12:50]). A watershed moment in these negotiations was the Doha agreement, signed on 29 February 2020, in which the US *officialised* the Taliban as a key party to the conflict and peace in Afghanistan. This accord validated the group's claim to be a legitimate political power in the country and shattered the image of the Kabul government. It also ignited the Taliban's subsequent diplomatic ascendancy that was furthered with the restoration of the Emirate in August 2021. Although the Taliban have not yet received official recognition from any other state (at the time of writing), regional countries have bestowed on them a semi-formal status. As an example, China appointed an ambassador to Afghanistan on 14 September 2023, but has refrained from explicitly characterising this diplomatic move as a formal recognition of the Emirate (*Al Jazeera*, 2023). Overall, the Taliban's current external connections and interactions far exceed those of their former outcast regime.

The chapter is structured as follows. It commences with a review of the emergence and downfall of the Taliban's first Emirate, exploring how the group prioritised its identity and religious beliefs over the survival of its authority. Second, it examines how the insurgent Taliban legitimised themselves and de-legitimised the Kabul government. Following this, the chapter analyses the changing structural conditions—both regional and historical—which opened the space for the Taliban's recovery from the 2001 defeat and facilitated their return to power. Fourthly, the group's precarious international standing is scrutinised. This section discusses key external validations of the Taliban's status over time, and regional reactions to the revival of their jihadi nationalist government in 2021. It then investigates potential reasons why universal official recognition of this government remains elusive. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly contrasting the Taliban's quest for international legitimacy with that of other Jihadi and armed groups, and providing a glimpse into their government's future trajectory.

2. Rise and Fall of the Taliban (1996-2001)

The Taliban (religion students) originated in 1994 as a rural Pashtun vigilante movement aimed at restoring order and peace in Kandahar. This city, much like the rest of Afghanistan, had been ravaged by lawlessness and atrocities during the intra-Mujahideen civil war following the collapse of the Communist regime in 1992. The group's religious nature and ability to suppress criminal activities and re-open transportation routes for people's movement and trade garnered significant support from Afghans and neighbouring Pakistan, which sought commercial opportunities with Afghanistan and Central Asia. This backing fuelled the Taliban's lightning victories across Afghanistan, culminating in the conquest of Kabul and the establishment in September 1996 of the regime that would later be known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

The Taliban sought to create a utopian society, drawing inspiration from the early Islamic governance systems. During an assembly of *Ulama* (religious scholars) in Kandahar in April 1996, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the group's founder, proclaimed the Taliban's ultimate goal to be the implementation of the rules of Islam. In response, the enthusiastic crowd bestowed upon him the title of *Amir ul-Mo'mineen* (Commander of the Faithful), a historic designation previously held by caliphs, who wielded supreme spiritual and temporal authority over the Muslim community.

On their route to power, the Taliban showed competence in navigating the domestic Afghan landscape and deploying political strategies to further their military goals. They mobilised their co-ethnics, occasionally co-opted former communists, incentivised defections or demobilisations of enemy commanders and rewarded the loyalty of local power brokers (Sinno,

2009: 59–89). However, the group's grasp of foreign relations and state politics was limited (Maley, 2006: 10; Harpviken, 2021: 2). Prominent jihadi strategist and Taliban supporter Abu Musab al-Suri (1998: 29) observed that the group demonstrated a "general ignorance of world affairs".

Indeed, the Taliban, at least in their earliest years, did not seem to concern themselves with the world beyond the Islamic frontiers. A summary of a rare introductory pamphlet of the group—penned for them by Pakistani scholar Sher Ali Shah—highlighted the Taliban's intention to "deepen" and "improve" relations with "all Islamic countries and organisations" against the background that "arbitration in all political and international issues would be based on the Book [Quran] and the Sunnah [the Prophet's words and deeds]" (Haqqani, 1997: 108–9). No mention was made of other countries.

This would later change as the newly ruling Taliban established ties with international organisations, oil corporations and foreign states. Still, the group's insular approach and mistrust of external agendas would lead to clashes with other actors in their region and beyond. One issue is that the Taliban appeared to treat Afghanistan's borders as a demarcation of their obligations and prerogatives. They disavowed responsibility for external matters and asserted their exclusive authority over internal affairs, even though these two domains often overlapped (see Zaeef, 2010: 119). In other words, the Taliban did not seem to anticipate the potential challenges arising from their adherence to certain policies, values or goals within Afghanistan which could pose security threats or other anxieties to outside nations.

A salient example in this regard is the sheltering of Osama bin Laden and other foreign fighters, many of whom took part in the US-sponsored anti-Soviet resistance in the 1980s.[110] From the early days of their relationship, Taliban officials provided assurances of religious solidarity and fraternal support to bin Laden and the Arabs around him (Al-Suri, 1998: 34). While it is true that the Taliban's connections to al-Qaeda and other non-Afghan militants can be viewed as driven by expediency,[111] this perspective fails to fully capture the Taliban's reasoning behind hosting and protecting them. After all, despite the enormous costs, including the loss of their government and lives, the Taliban remained steadfastly aligned with al-Qaeda. Therefore, to gain a deeper insight into this relationship and the political rationale of the Taliban, it is essential to carefully consider how their belief systems shaped their actions.

After the 11 September attacks by al-Qaeda, the future of the Taliban's Emirate hung in the balance. George W. Bush (2001) presented the group with an ultimatum to "hand over the

[110] Bin Laden was initially hosted by Mujahideen commander Yunus Khalis in Jalalabad.

[111] Foreign jihadis fought alongside the Taliban and al-Qaeda eliminated their domestic arch-rival Ahmed Shah Massoud (see *CBC*, 2021).

terrorists or … share in their fate." In fact, it was a universal warning, as Bush declared: "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (*AP Archive*, 2015: [02:16]). In stark contrast to most countries, including Pakistan, whose instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) led them to embrace the so-called 'war on terror' to placate the US and reap potential rewards, the Taliban's value rationality (*Wertrationalität*) guided them along a different path.[112]

Although some strategists among the Taliban leaders were reportedly more inclined to distance the group from al-Qaeda (see Loidolt, 2022: 138–142), others, including the Amir, held a different view. For the latter, the US threat represented a dilemma: they had to choose between safeguarding their government and upholding their worldview. Strikingly, the Taliban calculus did not appear to include protecting Afghanistan or the well-being of its people. This is possibly due to their belief in the inseparability of defending their morals and values from ensuring a dignified life for their nation. "Osama issue is our faith issue, and we are not going to change our faith for anyone", declared Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, then the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad, as the US invasion to uproot al-Qaeda and the Taliban was underway (*AP Archive*, 2001: [01:30]). Mullah Omar based his stance on the *fatwa* (interpretative sharia-based pronouncement) from the Taliban's Ulama that bin Laden could not be forcibly expelled from Afghanistan. "We will not ask Osama to leave or turn himself in. […] Islam and the honour of the Afghans do not allow us to meet [the Americans'] demands. […] We understand that they can badly damage us but their demands are more devastating for our religion and faith" (Mutma'in, 2022: 229–30). Under Mullah Omar's leadership, the Taliban made the ultimate sacrifice for their beliefs, resulting in the swift collapse of the Emirate after the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001.

3. On home turf: rebel Taliban's legitimacy in battle and governance

In late 2001, the Taliban were thought to be finished after their forces were routed and Afghanistan had a new internationally-recognised republican regime under Hamid Karzai. Instead, they emerged from adversity, staged a protracted insurgency and eventually forced the US to come to terms with them in 2020 in Doha. The Taliban earned transformative diplomatic recognition by the US after they had proved their capabilities in both battle and governance in Afghanistan. This section examines the discourses and actions that underlined the Taliban's domestic legitimacy and re-cemented their position as the foremost Afghan political power.

[112] Instrumental rationality is utilitarian, guided by maximising benefits. Value rationality is devotional, driven by fidelity to intrinsic beliefs. In reality, these rationalities are inseparable. See Weber (1978: 24–25).

It is evident that certain external factors, including Pakistani sanctuaries and détentes with Iran and Russia, facilitated the success of the Taliban insurgency. However, regional support alone cannot explain how the Taliban emerged from a shattering defeat to challenge the US forces, expand their territorial control and even conquer Kabul before the last US soldier left Afghanistan on 31 August 2021. In fact, the advent of some of these exogenous factors was contingent on the Taliban "demonstrat[ing] some capacity to fight" (Giustozzi 2019, 31) and establishing themselves as a dependable military force in Afghanistan. *Fighting* was indeed the Taliban's principal practice to promote and legitimise their 'defensive jihad' against the US. Moreover, as time went on, the salience of these exogenous factors intensified. In other words, these factors held limited explanatory power during the early stages of the Taliban insurgency when the stakes for the rebellion were exceedingly high and failure appeared nearly certain.

What then motivated the surviving Taliban, after the Emirate's downfall, to opt for armed resistance against the US military, knowing that their death was reasonably likely? This is a pertinent question because a solely instrumental rationale could have guided them to seek safety and physical well-being, for example, by hiding in remote villages, defecting or fleeing the country. Another relevant question is: why did many Afghans welcome the Taliban back in their regions?

Part of the answer to these questions, this chapter argues, lies in the Taliban's legitimating ideas and actions, which tapped into Afghanistan's history, culture and religion, and struck a chord with the people. Among these values were anti-colonial resistance, defence of the Afghan way of life, martyrdom and jihad. These ideals were precious goals for the Taliban, and they pursued them relentlessly, without being deterred by the looming costs. The Taliban's performance on the battlefield and in governance reified these values, demonstrating to Afghans that resistance is the only way for those unwilling to live a "reduced mode of being" (Varshney, 2003: 93) and endure humiliation under foreign infidel authority.

Another part of the answer involves the popular perceptions of the Afghan Republic's moral standing and functionality. This is important because understanding rebels' legitimacy necessitates incorporating their opponent's regime in the picture. The most relevant point here is how the Taliban de-legitimised the Kabul government and its foreign sponsor, the US. Although atrocities were committed by the US and Kabul, as well as the Taliban, it is clear that, in comparison, the Taliban's legitimacy claims and narratives resonated more with the values and interests of the local population. While the Taliban claimed to be fighting to liberate Afghanistan and restore a native Islamic government, the US claimed to be assisting the Afghans in building a modern liberal democracy. Over time, the Taliban's actions and objectives appeared remarkably consistent and credible, whereas those of the US did not.

3.1. Fighting, voicing and state mimicking: the Taliban's legitimating practices

The Taliban continued to put up fierce insurgent resistance despite sustaining heavy casualties. This won them the respect of both their countrymen and enemies. "[T]his is not about money or jobs. The Taliban are fighting for something larger", opined US diplomat Michael McKinley in October 2014 (Malkasian, 2021: 5). Later, as he sat across the negotiation table from the Taliban in Doha, US General Austin S. Miller conveyed that "he respected them as fighters" (Mashal, 2019).

What has been largely overlooked in most Western analyses of the Afghan conflict is why the Taliban's fighting spirit seemed exceptionally unrelenting. The failure to understand this crucial dimension of the Taliban's insurgency stemmed from a broader negligence of acknowledging the legitimating power and role of ideology and beliefs in Afghanistan. Carter Malkasian's (2021) *The American War in Afghanistan* offered a valuable contribution to this particular debate. Malkasian (2021: 6) found it perplexing that "the possibility that Islam and resistance to occupation played a role in America's Afghan War has gone oddly unnoticed, almost shunned—in a country where … religion defines daily life".

Yet, the assumption here is not that all the Taliban were true believers or that their ideational claims were universally sincere. None of these is a must for ideas and beliefs to impact the conflict and its parties in significant ways (Maynard, 2019). Therefore, bearing in mind George C. Marshall's words that it is "*morale* that wins the victory" (Vaughn, 1983: 28), the exploration of the Taliban's stated beliefs merits scholarly attention.

The group declared that its resistance against the US occupation is a continuation of the Afghan nation's historical confrontations with the British and Soviet empires (see Baradar, 2023). By portraying the conflict as a struggle for national liberation, the Taliban sought to *voice* the legitimacy and nobility of their cause to the public. They presented themselves as the vanguard against the US attempt "to obliterate the Afghan identity" (Al-Sharky, 2006: 24) and its "injustice and marginalisation" towards the Pashtun community (*Al-Somood,* 2006: 1).

During the early insurgency years, the Taliban self-identified as 'Mujahideen' and 'the Islamic Movement of the Taliban'. However, in October 2007, they declared the "restoration of the Islamic Emirate's government" on 44 % of the country's territory (Maiwandi, 2007b). The Taliban have since adopted the primary self-designation of 'the Islamic Emirate', signifying a resurrection of the previous order, overturned by foreign invaders in 2001. Subsequent events would prove how the group deemed this name, along with the white flag inscribed with the *Shahada* (Islamic testimony of faith), as crucial legitimating tools. In their quest for *mimicking* the state in

order to be perceived as one, in 2013 the Taliban refused to relinquish their regalia of statehood—i.e. the name and the flag—resulting in the closure of their office in Doha. Similarly, despite objections from the UN Security Council (2020) and the Troika (China, Russia, US and Pakistan), the Taliban disregarded the calls to forgo restoring the Islamic Emirate upon taking control of Kabul (State Department, 2021).

Furthermore, the Taliban's bold assaults on Afghan and foreign forces, characterised by high risks and minimal chances of survival for the attackers, alongside their utilisation of suicide operations, served as evidence that the Taliban act in accordance with their professed convictions. Longing for martyrdom—a pure form of value-committed behaviour—has been a major theme in the Taliban's discourse. The Taliban's Amir Akhundzada (2016: 3) asserted to "the American occupiers" in July 2016 that the Afghans "consider martyrdom in confrontation with you a cherished goal of their life." On the battlefield, the Taliban's death-embracing attitude sharply contrasted the focus of Western forces on having no casualties.

Besides the insurgents' distinguished fighting morale, the Taliban leadership communicated in words and deeds its cohesion and unity. Although the group consisted of multiple nodes of command and control, the ultimate authority was vested in the Amir (and under him in the Shura council and the Ulama). Within the Taliban, the Amir is considered to be the successor of Prophet Mohammed. Consequently, under normal circumstances, nothing can absolve the Taliban members from obeying him as long as he remains committed to the rules of Islam as they interpret them. In other words, Taliban members must follow the Amir's command even if they disagree with it. The Quran's directives, such as "obey Allah and obey the Messenger, and those in authority among you" (Ayah 59, Surat al-Nisa'), and real-life lessons of the intra-Mujahideen civil war facilitated the Taliban's deep internalisation of obedience, submission and loyalty as the means to achieve victory. Sirajuddin Haqqani, then the Taliban's deputy Amir, conveyed that his father, the powerful Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, believed that "unity was the reason why the whole world failed against Amir ul-Mo'mineen" (*Al-Somood*, 2016: 6). One can imagine that the military pressure from the US and the circumstances of the insurgency helped to set much of the Taliban's internal disagreements aside. Whether or not this played a role, the unity of purpose and means sustained the group's striking camaraderie.

The Taliban's parallel state was consolidating on the ground. Notably, their efficient and accessible policing and Sharia courts solidified their territorial control and boosted their popular legitimacy. Many scholars opined that the group's effective delivery of justice was one of the key factors contributing to their eventual success (see Baczko, 2021). Nevertheless, the Taliban were exhausted. By late 2000s, the group's strategists were empowered to launch diplomatic and media

charm offensives and explore troop withdrawal talks with the US. The Taliban's approach to negotiations was later described by Mullah Akhtar Mansour, the Taliban's second Amir, as follows: "We—besides the armed struggle—engage in politics but at the right time and according to the conditions defined by the Islamic Sharia, … we will not come to the negotiation table under external pressures … those who want to reconcile with us must submit to our demands" (*Al-Somood*, 2015b: 4).

In summary, the Taliban's increasing popular and regional support made the defeat of the insurgency difficult to achieve. The backing of rural Afghans for the Taliban, whether driven by what the Taliban claimed to represent or by discontent with the Kabul government and its foreign patrons, served as a clear lesson. It underscored that international recognition of a government (like the one in Kabul) may not endure if the latter lacks a genuine domestic power base.

3.2. The Taliban's de-legitimation of the opponent: the image crisis of Kabul

The initial optimism surrounding the US democratic project in Afghanistan quickly waned. The legitimacy of that endeavour was questioned as the US aligned itself with "the worst of the worst" (Coll, 2018: 268) of corrupt local warlords and strongmen, turning a blind eye to their crimes against the Afghans, including child sexual abuse and torture. Many people saw the Afghan police as "the main criminals" (Rubin, 2007: 67) and the court system as a marketplace where justice was, quite literally, up for sale. As former US State Secretary Mike Pompeo (2023: Chapter 16) put it, in the Afghan Republic, "corruption was "a feature, not a bug," as it was all that held the government together."

The Taliban's de-legitimating discourse regarding the Afghan government was corrosive and damaging as it exposed Kabul's malperformance and subservience to the Americans at every possible occasion. For the Taliban, this government was the 'stooge' or 'corrupt' Kabul 'administration,' and the Afghan presidents Karzai and Ashraf Ghani were just 'puppets' or 'agents' of their foreign masters. Both were frequently ridiculed for their lack of real authority and incapacity to stand up to the transgressions of the US military in the country (Maiwandi, 2007a: 23).

The Afghan government was undoubtedly corrupt and unable to refute the Taliban's portrayal of it as a client state. It could not shield small farmers from the economic devastation caused by poorly-conceived American anti-narcotics programmes. It also failed to stop the US military's night raids and airstrikes, which caused thousands of innocent Pashtun deaths. The electoral process in Afghanistan was marred by extensive fraud (see *UChicago*, 2023: [32:00]), where the presidency's winner was determined by external actors, not Afghan votes (see SIGAR, 2022:

36). Foreign funds that poured into Afghanistan favoured a few select beneficiaries in the capital and elsewhere, while the average Afghan continued to struggle with insecurity and poverty. Widespread discontent with Kabul was compounded by crimes committed by US soldiers, such as the 2012 Quran burning, which bolstered the Taliban's narratives about the occupation, its local collaborators and the war on Islam. In this context, the legitimacy of the insurgents surged as they responded to perceived grievances and injustices, attracting Afghans who saw the Taliban punishing predators, defending vulnerable peasants and representing Islamic and national values.

Internationally, the Taliban's most impactful strategy to discredit the Republic was their refusal to acknowledge Kabul as even a party to the conflict. The Taliban's logic was that the principal concerned parties were exclusively themselves and the US, and not "the traitor … administration, which is but the new-born of the Crusader occupation" (Mukhtar, 2007: 24). The Taliban firmly rejected engaging in a dialogue with the Republic in order not to "confer legitimacy on [its] puppet government" (Ghaznawi, 2009: 14). During peace negotiations with the Americans, the Taliban maintained the exclusion of Kabul from the talks as a non-negotiable condition.

4. Regional and global time shifts: enabling the Taliban's ascension

Armed groups do not operate in a vacuum. To fully comprehend their international standing, it is imperative to contextualise their politics within geopolitical power configurations and global normative and strategic trends. In essence, regional dynamics and the *global historical time* matter. This section therefore examines some contextual circumstances that contributed to the Taliban rebounding from devastation in 2001 to become a *de facto* government and candidate for state normalisation since 2021.

4.1. Regional support: an indispensable springboard to global rise?

In Central and South Asia, the term 'region' encompasses countries with diverse and sometimes conflicting agendas. However, the post-2001 regional trend has seen a gradual acceptance of the Taliban. In the 1990s, the group posed security threats to most of its neighbours as it sheltered foreign militants bent on challenging the stability of these nations. Consequently, Russia, Iran, India, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan allied themselves first with anti-Taliban Afghan forces, and later with the US-led invasion to overthrow the Taliban regime. At the time, the Taliban's ties to al-Qaeda and the impending US war in Afghanistan prompted the only three countries that had officially recognised the Emirate—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—to

rescind their recognition. As the Taliban were falling from power in 2001, not a single government was on their side.

For a brief time, Islamabad repudiated the Taliban, but around 2003, the Pakistanis rekindled their pivotal support for the group to counter India's schemes in Afghanistan. Over time, Islamabad has consistently stood as the Taliban's most reliable and sometimes sole ally. Pakistani assistance took multiple forms and came from different constituencies within the country,[113] but most importantly, the Taliban received sanctuary, logistics and military aid (Giustozzi 2019, 31). It is conceivable that the absence of Pakistan's help would likely have hindered the restoration of the Emirate in 2021. Upon the Taliban's return to power, Islamabad urged the world to "be realistic" and "engage" with them (*Al Jazeera*, 2021).

In addition to Pakistan, the insurgent Taliban's opposition to the presence of both the US and ISKP (the Islamic State Khorasan Province) in Afghanistan expanded their regional approval and transformed former adversaries, such as Tehran and Moscow, into a friendly constituency (Mujahid, 2016: 6; Reuters Staff, 2015). ISKP endangered regional security and challenged the Taliban's religious and jihadi credentials. Initially, in June 2015, the Taliban made a fraternal appeal to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the IS supreme leader, not to threaten "the unity of the jihadi rank and its cohesion against global infidelity" in Afghanistan (Mansour, 2015: 2). The failure of this appeal propelled the Taliban to turn against ISKP with full force. This development aligned the Taliban paradoxically with Kabul, Washington, Tehran and Moscow.

During that time, the Taliban's foreign jihadi comrades continued to evoke apprehension among regional countries. However, the threat from ISKP overshadowed that from others. The Taliban seized this opening to boost their legitimacy and establish friendly ties with neighbouring and other countries. They undertook serious anti-ISKP operations and doubled down on their positive self-representation as an Islamic and nationalist organisation that has no aspirations beyond the Afghan borders.

Moreover, the Taliban utilised new communication tools and contemporary political discourse of sovereignty, neutrality, regional stability, economic co-operation and non-interference in others' affairs to legitimise their cause and detract their enemies. The insurgents departed significantly from their previous purely dogmatic and dismissive approach towards their neighbours' cross-borders concerns in the 1990s, including security, drug trafficking and immigration. Instead, the Taliban sought to convey a willingness to address and alleviate these concerns. Whereas most regional capitals—with the exception of Islamabad—did not favour the

[113] The relationship between the Pakistani authorities and the Taliban was not immune to occasional double-crossings and back-stabbings.

idea of a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, the contacts that these capitals established with the insurgents seemed to prepare them for this looming reality.

4.2. From uni- to multi-polarity: the Taliban's chances in a new global time

When the Taliban first took power in 1996, the global order had clearly transitioned from bi- to uni-polarity. It was the moment of triumph of "the Western *idea*" of liberalism and democracy (Fukuyama, 1989). Against this backdrop, nothing captured the attention more than the shocking practices of the Taliban's *Hisba* or *al-Amr bil Ma'roof* (vice and virtue police tasked with enjoining good and forbidding evil). This department carried out public amputations, stonings and lashings for various offences. Women in particular were subjected to severe restrictions.

The Taliban's practices were condemned not only by rights advocates, but also by allied Arab jihadis. Al-Suri (1998: 31-2), for instance, criticised the "repulsive harshness" and "un-Islamic" conduct of some Hisba squads, attributing them to the "ignorance or harshness … of [some of] the Pashtuns of Central and Southern Afghanistan".

Yet, had the Soviet Union not disintegrated, perhaps the Taliban's gender and social policy would have remained off the Western radar, much like that of the former Mujahideen government. However, the group's draconical domestic rule coincided with the triumph of Western liberal values of human rights and democracy, which came to define what is legitimate and accepted on the global stage (Clark 2005, 174; Mulligan 2006, 379).

The 11 September attacks heralded a new world historical time, shifting the focus of international politics to terrorism. In this era, armed groups were universally stigmatised and criminalised, as was any dialogue with them. Distinctions between those whom the US considered terrorists and their sympathisers were blurred, enabling large-scale human rights violations and war crimes against the Taliban and innocent Afghans in the wake of the invasion of their country. Torturing insurgents became routine in detention centres like Pul-e Charkhi, Bagram and Guantanamo (see Human Rights Watch, 2004). These nefarious and unlawful policies heightened religious fervour among non-captured Taliban members, making fighting to the death an honourable pathway compared to captivity and humiliation. Facing the same destiny, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and other jihadi groups banded together and leveraged the solidarity of those who perceived the US-led global campaign as a war on Islam rather than terrorism. This sentiment was particularly prevalent in Pakistan's border regions and among some wealthy gulf donors. Overall, the US counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan undermined the Kabul government, angered Afghans and legitimised the Taliban's rebellion.

Almost two decades into this unwinnable war, the standing of the US as the globe's unrivalled hegemon considerably deteriorated, and its top national security interest shifted from counterterrorism to containing China. The rise of the People's Republic marked the potential emergence of a novel international system. As this global transition began to unfold, the Taliban returned to power, expressing their desire to join the China caravan. The group's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (2023) predicted that "the pace towards multipolarity has accelerated. [...] and our region particularly, will play a key role in this new world order".

China's interests in Afghanistan encompass counterterrorism and investment. Yet, the relevance of the landlocked country under the Taliban may transcend these interests. Afghanistan could provide China with a new front to set its global leadership apart from that of the US. Much like in other parts of the world, China's foreign policy in Afghanistan is centred on diplomacy, commercial ties and 'win-win co-operation'.[114] If this policy contributes to stabilising Afghanistan and improving the well-being of its people, it would not only undermine Washington's isolation of the Taliban, but also bolster China's regional influence and its self-portrayal as a benevolent superpower. Beijing's precedent-setting decision to designate an ambassador to the Emirate marked a pivotal step in the pursuit of these objectives. This stands in contrast to the US, whose foreign policy towards Afghanistan has been marked by military intervention and the ongoing imposition of crippling economic sanctions. China openly expressed *schadenfreude* regarding the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan. It viewed the 20-year occupation of the country not just as a military fiasco but also as a US failure in international politics and credibility *(Observer Network*, 2021).

Remarkably, a clear shared interest between the People's Republic and the Islamic Emirate is their preference for an international order in which the emphasis is on state sovereignty and non-interference in other states' domestic affairs rather than democratic or universal human rights. Many other conservative and authoritarian countries and political forces would also support the emergence of such an order.[115]

The US-China great power competition would offer regional blocs and smaller nations, like Afghanistan, more leeway and freedom to pursue their interests, even if not endorsed by one of the two leading world powers. Thus, it is plausible to surmise that the Taliban—if they heed the Chinese and regional demands, and show considerable flexibility—might have a better chance at gaining more international recognition. Conversely, the Taliban's situation decades ago was very different, as the supremacy of US power, influence and values was unchallenged.

[114] A ubiquitous Chinese characterisation of their approach to foreign relations, aid and trade.
[115] Including in Europe and the US.

Certainly, the upswing of Chinese influence in world politics does not mean that the values of human rights and democracy will lose their relevance. The point is rather that a new global order may provide legitimacy-aspirant governments with more avenues, such as regional alliances or plurilateral state associations, to seek external validation and support beyond the US and the Western sphere.

5. The Taliban's global standing: achievements and limitations

Since 2001, the Taliban have made significant strides in their quest for international legitimacy. They transitioned from a defunct regime to a de facto government with manifold international diplomatic ties and connections. Nonetheless, the Emirate still lacks definitive official recognition as a legitimate state actor. This section reviews instances of external validations of the Taliban's claims to be the rightful authority in Afghanistan as an insurgency and later as a government. Potential factors contributing to the group's lack of an explicit formal status are then examined.

5.1. Validations of the insurgent Taliban's legitimacy

Between 2001 and 2023, the Taliban garnered varying degrees of external *support*, *acknowledgment* and *officialisation*. Each instance of validation—regardless of its motivation—contributed to the group's international standing. As discussed earlier, one of the earliest and most consequential Taliban's earnings was the revival of the Pakistani support around 2003. Pakistan sheltered the Taliban leaders and facilitated their fighters' cross-border infiltrations and attacks against foreign troops in Afghanistan. A steady flow of recruits from refugee camps, madrassas and tribal regions across the border joined the group's ranks. Similarly, starting in 2005, Iran provided training and funding while leveraging local networks in Western Afghanistan to bolster the Taliban. Over the next two years, the insurgency's strength prompted discreet interactions between German, Norwegian and UK officials and the Taliban.

These interactions paved the way to preliminary talks between the US and the Taliban, commencing on 28 November 2010, in Munich, Germany. The Taliban sought objectives beyond armed conflict, such as the release of its Guantanamo prisoners and the establishment of a political bureau in Qatar. Concurrently, the failure of the 2009 US troop surge to quell the insurgency led President Barack Obama to recognise negotiations with the insurgents as the viable path forward. The Munich meetings opened the door to the Taliban's first major legitimacy breakthrough. This was the establishment of their US-approved representation office in Doha on 18 June 2013. Through its inauguration, the Taliban visually and symbolically showcased their sovereignty as a

government-in-waiting, featuring the name, the Islamic Emirate, and the white flag. As noted previously, the office was swiftly closed after the Taliban refused to surrender these symbols. Nonetheless, this episode was a turning point that signified the group's political weight and broke their international isolation.

Amid their military victories, the strategists among the Taliban's leaders saw a potential path to international acceptance through a troop withdrawal deal with the US. This diplomatic turn appears to be a lesson learnt from their past, which proved that ruling Afghanistan in defiance of the world is untenable. Negotiations with the Americans culminated in the 29 February 2020 Doha agreement—the most remarkable international validation of the Taliban's claims to legitimacy. The Taliban secured this recognition without compromising their distinct ideological beliefs, including their associations with groups like al-Qaeda and their vision for the future Afghan government. The Doha accord thus represents a recognition achieved largely on the Taliban's own terms.

The agreement acknowledged the Taliban as a political force to reckon with, but the US explicitly declined to recognise them as a prospective government. It also signalled to local and international actors that the Taliban's return to power was imminent. As a result, these actors revised their strategies in a manner that favoured the group and contributed to its diplomatic rise. By 15 August 2021 the cumulative impacts of the agreement and the Taliban's advances across the country precipitated the downfall of the Republic and the re-establishment of the Emirate.

5.2. Return of the world's sole jihadi nationalist government: regional reactions

The US holds unparalleled importance for the Taliban, and currently, no other country has a similar potential to impact Afghanistan. However, the US and the West have been distant and hesitant in their interactions with the Emirate. Differently, regional powers and countries, including China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan, embraced the return of the Taliban. They kept their embassies operational in Kabul and hosted Taliban-designated diplomats on their soil. To Anas Haqqani, these facts constitute a "silent" international recognition of the Emirate (Jalal Foundation, 2023: 26).

Indeed, since 2021, neighbouring countries to Afghanistan have effectively been integrating the Emirate into the regional landscape and validating its governmental status. They often refer to the Taliban as "the Afghan interim government" (MFA China, 2023) or "the interim Afghan authorities" (MFA Uzbekistan, 2023). The neighbours also engage in routine bi-lateral meetings with Taliban officials, who are frequently invited to regional forums like the Tashkent International Conference and Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan. High-profile

receptions and visits have become customary regional gestures towards Taliban officials, both abroad and within Afghanistan. For instance, on 24 March 2022, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the "Acting Foreign Minister of the Afghan Interim Government", Muttaqi, in Kabul (MFA China, 2022). On 6 July 2022, the Amiri Diwan (2022), the seat of the Qatari government, announced the Qatari Amir's meeting with "HE Defense Minister in the Afghan caretaker government", Mohammad Yaqoob. The latter was received by the Saudi Crown Prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, during the 2023 Hajj season (Mujahid, 2023).

Unfettered by the ideological gap between the Taliban and the West, regional states seem eager to enhance relations with the group, in pursuit of the potential benefits of Afghanistan's stability and its inclusion into regional development and economic projects. Predictably, the ruling Taliban's primary legitimacy claims align with these states' expectations. According to Muttaqi (2023), the Emirate is a "powerful central government" under which a "stable and secure Afghanistan has the potential of playing a pivotal role" in the region. He warned that an alternative to Taliban rule could lead to "regional instability, narcotics boom, arms proliferation, illegal migration and other challenges." Corroborating these claims, the UK Chargé d'Affaires to Afghanistan, Robert Dickson, stated that engaging with the Taliban became the "only" way for other states to pursue their interests in the country (*Amu TV*, 2023: [01:36]). A widely-held contemporary perspective, as highlighted by Dickson, is that challenging the Taliban's authority by force would aggravate the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and create a space for ISKP and other militant groups to threaten regional and international security. This suggests that for many countries, the Taliban rule is considered justified even if it is not desired. Legitimacy arises not only from believing that an authority is rightful but also from deeming it justifiable.

5.3. The Taliban's legitimacy dilemma: deficits and internal barriers

Despite the widespread acceptance of the Taliban's ruling status, no country has officially recognised their government. Furthermore, the Taliban, as of the time of writing, are still on the US list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists (since 2002), the Russian list of terrorist organisations (since 2003) and the UN sanctions list (since 1999). The persistence of these instances of institutional de-recognition of the group largely stems from the strategic and moral dilemmas associated with its policy and value commitments. These dilemmas perturb the region and Western countries.

Various countries engage with the Emirate partly because of the Taliban's fierce clampdown on ISKP. However, the Taliban also shelter other armed groups, including the anti-Pakistan *Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan* (TTP), anti-China *Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement* (ETIM) and

al-Qaeda, which threaten regional and global security (MFA China, 2023). Pakistan, for instance, has experienced a surge in TTP cross-border attacks since the Taliban regained power. Perhaps nothing exposed the Taliban's failure to fulfil their counterterrorism commitments more than the US drone strike that killed al-Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul in August 2022 (SIGAR, 2023). It is assumed that many foreign militants in Afghanistan have sworn allegiance to the Taliban and fought alongside them during the past 20 years. Thus, the prospect of the group forcefully turning against its foreign militant allies seems doubtful.

Secondly, the Taliban dismissed the international demand, put forward by China, Russia, the US, the EU and regional countries, for the formation of a broad-based government. All these actors believe that lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan are not achievable under one-party rule. Despite the group's promise during the Doha negotiations to establish an inclusive system (Haqqani, 2020), it continues to reject pluralism, fearing that it could allow corrupt and secular former Afghan elites to infiltrate the Emirate, tarnish its Islamist purity and subvert its governance.

Thirdly, the Taliban similarly reneged on their pledge to allow women's education and work *(Afghanistan News*, 2022*)*, which antagonised the UN,[116] Western countries and the Islamic world (Dawi, 2022). Honouring this promise could have improved the Taliban's besmirched image, but the group's ideologues based in Kandahar chose not to do so. Women's education became a matter of internal disagreement among the Taliban leaders: the group's purist figures dis-empowered Kabul-based strategists and settled the matter to the detriment of Afghan people and the Taliban.

In April 2022, the Taliban's Chief Justice Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani, a leading doctrinaire, published a book entitled *The Islamic Emirate and its System*. This unprecedented treatise represents a 'manifesto', something the Taliban had never produced before. The endorsement of the book by the Taliban's Amir and Ulama underscores its authoritative status and significance as a window into the beliefs and principles underlying the Taliban's governance philosophy. In this treatise, Haqqani (2022: 151–52, 251) contends that "the so-called education, culture, and women's rights" are "a sedition [against] the divine system" and that "fixing women [lies] in [them staying] at home". The book does not feature the material welfare and prosperity of the Afghan people as the Taliban's utmost concern. Instead, the central priorities are guiding people towards God, enhancing their morals and ultimately "guarding the religion" (Ibid, 20-21, 44).

It is evident that many hardliners within the Taliban do not value international engagement and integration. They reportedly believe that limiting ties with the external world safeguards the

[116] In April 2023, the group banned Afghan women from working for the UN in the country. The Taliban's policies have conceivably influenced the UN's decision to defer handing over Afghanistan's UN seat to them.

purity of their creed and way of life. Nevertheless, they would still welcome external legitimacy for their government, as long as it aligns with their conditions. In simpler terms, they seek recognition without compromising their beliefs. For the US, this represents a "faulty illusion" on the Taliban's side: attempting to both deprive women and minorities of their rights while seeking improved international relations (Price, 2023). This American view did not, however, disrupt the ongoing meetings of US and Emirate officials.

It is also observable that this clique of Taliban ideologues opposes moderate policies proposed by both non-Muslims and Muslims, despite the ubiquitous acceptance of such policies in Muslim-majority countries. Conceivably, this is partly because such countries are not considered to be valid references by the Taliban, who believe that their Emirate stands as the world's only true Islamic government (Afghani, 2023; Haqqani, 2022: 21 & 151). Within this clique, there exists a clear and intense apprehension. They fear that even the slightest political compromise could lead them down a precarious path, eroding their indigenous cultural and spiritual convictions, alienating their followers and diminishing their unity. These purists seem to believe that non-believers' dissatisfaction is a harbinger or sign of divine approval.

Nevertheless, a possibility remains that the Taliban may re-consider their position on women's education and work. As discussed earlier, the group's strategists had committed to upholding these rights, which accord with Islamic teachings. A policy change might not be entirely implausible, should the pragmatic voices within the Taliban regain influence, and the advocacy of Afghan people and Muslim interlocutors inside and around Afghanistan persist.

After all, since their return in 2021, the Taliban have made some notable progress in Afghanistan—enhancing security, curbing opium cultivation and tackling corruption. However, the group's current political dispensation—where the Amir remains secluded, and the supreme command in Kandahar marginalises the government in Kabul—curtails their capacity to build on these achievements and expand their global ties. Under too rigid leadership, the ideologues' subjective cultural and religious opinions often attain near-sacred status, impeding external negotiations and transactions, even within the widely accepted confines of Islam. A real conundrum here is that a reformed political setup could lead the Taliban towards greater international engagement and acceptance, but it could equally bring them to the brink of collapse.

6. Conclusion

The Taliban's seizure of power in August 2021 marked the emergence of the sole jihadi nationalist government on the world stage, with which several major powers interact or have considerable diplomatic relations. Such an accomplishment places the Taliban in a unique position among jihadi organisations in particular and armed groups in general. No other jihadi group has managed to conquer a capital city and install its government by the force of arms, nor has any sought normal diplomatic ties with other countries or admission to the UN.

Unlike groups such as IS and al-Qaeda, which outright reject the international system and aim to overthrow or subvert it, the Taliban strive for inclusion within that very system. They also set themselves apart from other armed groups that prioritise achieving international legitimacy as a top strategic goal. For this reason, the Taliban navigate uncharted territory among non-state actors,[117] pursuing international recognition, but strictly on their own terms and not at any cost. The Taliban seek the advantages of international legitimacy, but not at the expense of their core identity and religious values. This explains the apparent paradox on the Taliban's part—actively pursuing recognition while concurrently devising policies that impede its realisation.

As this chapter has shown, a more nuanced understanding of the Taliban's behaviour and precarious international standing can be achieved when their ideological commitments are integrated into the analysis of their policy priorities and preferences. Such commitments have proved to be a double-edged sword in their pursuit of an official international status.

On one side, the Taliban's legitimating ideas of jihad, independence and the Afghan honour resonated locally and endowed the group with invincibility on the battlefield. This contributed to bringing about the Doha agreement which officialised the Taliban as a political power and paved their way back to Kabul. As Afghanistan's undisputed authority, engaging with the Taliban became an imperative for countries pursuing their interests there. This marks a significant milestone in the Taliban's path to legitimacy.

On the other side, despite the apparent universal acknowledgement that the Taliban are in control, not a single country has officially recognised their government. That is partly because the Taliban's policy expressions, rooted in their unique doctrinal and cultural ideals, raise security and normative concerns for neighbouring and Western actors. The growing sway of Taliban ideologues, at the expense of putative strategists, has hindered the group's global acceptance and inclusion. The Taliban's rejection to sever ties with foreign militants, establish an inclusive government and uphold women's and minority rights makes it difficult for other countries,

[117] The Taliban are currently also a de facto state actor.

especially in the West, to work with them. Therefore, the aspiration of achieving widespread official recognition on the Taliban's terms remains elusive.

In conclusion, rather than dictating what the Taliban must do, external actors should continue to engage with them, and empower local communities and Muslim interlocutors in and outside Afghanistan to voice their expectations from the Emirate. Amid China's ascendancy, evolving configurations of regional and world politics might offer the Taliban an avenue for legitimacy beyond the Western realm. However, this opportunity could slip away unless the group exhibits flexibility, empowers its politically astute officials and addresses the concerns outlined by Beijing and regional capitals. Should the Taliban's characteristic political dispensation and approach remain unchanged, rather than moving towards more normalisation, they risk becoming ensnared in a maelstrom of strained international relations.

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Paper No. 3

Beliefs and International Legitimacy

The Janus Face of the Taliban's Political Worldview and Value Rationality

Beliefs and International Legitimacy

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This article analyses the inter-connection between the Taliban's international fortunes and their political worldview and value rationality. Drawing on their discourse and expert interviews, the paper offers an explanation for the Taliban's return to Kabul and hitherto lack of explicit official recognition despite their manifold external relations. Spanning three decades, the Taliban's ideational canon has proved to be a double-edged sword in their pursuit of international legitimacy. As insurgents (2001–2021), it underpinned their remarkable battlefield and governance resilience, contributing to their restoration to power. As rulers (1996–2001 and 2021–present), it has put them on a collision course with certain international norms and security interests, precipitating the downfall of the first Emirate and lingering concerns about the second. This study addresses a gap in academic research on the ways in which the Taliban's value system contributed to consolidating their domestic power and outlasting the Western presence in Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

On 15 August 2021, the Taliban took over Kabul and resurrected their government, the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*. Twenty years earlier, the United States and the anti-Taliban Afghan coalition known as the *Northern Alliance* had removed the Emirate from power. But since 2001, the Taliban have crawled out from under the boot, staged a protracted insurgent comeback, and ultimately restored their control over their homeland. A milestone that paved the way to the Taliban's return to Kabul was the 29 February 2020 Doha Agreement. Under this accord, the US effectively recognised the Taliban as the paramount political force in Afghanistan. This transformative legitimacy episode "was the event to lit the fuse" of the group's ensuing diplomatic boom and nascent international rise (Maley and Jamal 2022, 50).

Now in power, the Taliban's current external ties and diplomatic interactions have by far eclipsed those of their 1996–2001 international pariah regime. However, the Emirate has not been

officially recognised by any other state. While China stands out as the sole country that has dispatched an ambassador to the Taliban government, it has refrained from explicitly equating this diplomatic overture with formal recognition of the Emirate (Al Jazeera 2023). Nevertheless, a current international consensus seems to hold that an armed intervention to remove the Taliban from power may exacerbate the destabilisation of Afghanistan and its surrounding region. This consequently means that, for many countries, the Taliban rule could be tolerable or justifiable, even if not rightful.

As such, the Taliban's triumphant return to Kabul poses some puzzling questions: how did the group persevere for two decades against a mighty Western military coalition and, in the process, upgrade its international position from an outcast to a de facto government and candidate for state normalisation? Why has no country officially recognised the Taliban despite their undisputed domination of Afghanistan and their growing diplomatic interactions? What explains the group's internal inconsistency as they seek international recognition but enact policies that work against this objective?

Given the relative novelty of the second Emirate, there is a paucity of research on the latter two questions. The article seeks to address this gap. Regarding the first question, existing scholarship has offered multiple interrelated answers, which are discussed below. However, what has been clearly missing in these answers is a thorough examination of the significance of the Taliban's agency, ideas, logic, and emotions in shaping their remarkable political trajectory.

Therefore, this paper argues that a comprehensive understanding of the Taliban's domestic power position and precarious international standing is not possible without taking into account their worldview and rationality. Worldview is understood here as the ideational roadmap—including ideology, culture, identity, and beliefs—to understand the self and navigate the external world. Rationality, on the other hand, denotes making reasoned decisions in pursuit of set goals.

1.1. Worldview and Rationality: Scope, Manifestation, and Significance

It would be fallacious to assume that the Taliban's worldview and rationality, rather than their and other actors' interests and tangible capabilities, were the determinants of the group's international fortunes. Ideas and material conditions are co-constitutive. They are not explanatory rivals. Hence, the main point of this article is that beliefs have a profound impact on identities and preferences and, consequently, on political behaviour and decision (Clark 2005, 14). As Max Weber illustrates, "the 'world images' that have been created by ideas have, like *switchmen*, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest" (Weber 1958, 280, emphasis added). In other words, the Taliban's ideas impact their power and quest for international legitimacy not by

themselves, but through their manifestation in, and construction of, the Taliban's perceptions of who they are and what matters most for them.

The Taliban are deliberate and rational actors. It should not be misconstrued that this paper suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, what set the group apart from its Afghan and foreign adversaries was the apparent extent to which professed values and ideology featured in each actor's calculus of interest and action on the ground. Evidently, the politics of these adversaries were generally motivated by what Weber (1978, 24–5) calls instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*)—material calculations to increase benefits and decrease costs. In contrast, considering the Taliban's past track record, the group has, at some critical junctures, adhered to value rationality (*Wertrationalität*). That is, "a conscious belief in the value for its own sake … independently of its prospects of success" (ibid.).

In reality, both rationalities are inseparable. However, they differ in the perception of the cost and the depth of devotion to the goal. Instrumental rationality relies on a straightforward means-end calculus, based on which an objective may be modified or even abandoned, if it turns out to be too costly. Utility maximisation is what drives this kind of rationality. On the other hand, value rationality is grounded in a conviction in the inherent importance of the objective itself, regardless of the associated costs. Commitment to deeply held beliefs, values, or principles is what fuels this rationality. Therefore, value rational behaviour may embrace lingering hardships and great personal sacrifices (Varshney 2003, 86).[118] In this light, this paper's ideational approach to understanding the Taliban's international legitimacy is significant for three primary reasons.

First, this approach complements the literature's frequently cited (alternative) explanations for the Taliban's return to power and resurgence as a governmental player in 2021. These necessary, but insufficient, causal arguments include: Pakistani sanctuaries and aid, the Afghan Republic's corruption and predation, US wrongdoings and changing priorities, and regional realignments and developments. Despite their causal salience, these explanations are marred with limitations that warrant attention.

One key shortcoming is that these explanations focus solely on macro or external political conditions. This overlooks the agency of the Taliban as purposeful actors and the impact of their

[118] History is replete with instances where large numbers of volunteers may step forward to defend their nations against external invaders or occupiers and risk sacrificing their lives in pursuit of freedom and independence. These individuals, far from acting irrationally, exemplify rational actors guided by a profound devotion to what they hold dear and value most. As social analysts, following Max Weber's interpretive sociology (*verstehende Soziologie*), our job is not to judge these values as good or bad, or whether they are worth fighting for. The focus should rather be understanding (*verstehen*) how they influence the actions and decisions of those who believe in them. As discussed in subsequent sections of this paper, the Taliban's decision to go to war with the US in October 2001 instead of surrendering Osama bin Laden—which they perceived as an abandonment of their Afghan and religious values—stands as a striking example of value rationality.

own decisions and actions. Additionally, the advent of some of these conditions—such as the Taliban's post-2001 Pakistani support and rapprochements with Iran and Russia—depended on the group demonstrating its capacity to fight and its reliability as a military actor (Giustozzi 2019, 31). Furthermore, the intensity of these conditions and their causal potential grew as time progressed. That is, their explanatory power was minimal when the stakes for the Taliban's insurgency were extremely high and failure seemed all but inevitable.

In the immediate aftermath of the Taliban's defeat in 2001, the surviving members could have fled Afghanistan, defected, or melted into rural hinterlands. Certainly, many did. However, others chose to rebel against the US military during a period when no country appeared willing to help them. Why then did early insurgents decide to fight, knowing that their demise was almost certain? The answer, this article argues, is potentially rooted in these insurgents' commitment to their identity and religious beliefs. They deemed preserving their dignity against foreign oppression, defending Islam, and liberating Afghanistan from 'infidels' to be precious goals, in themselves, that no costs seemed high enough to deter their persistent pursuit. Put differently, these rebels' value rationality underpinned their choice to combat a formidable enemy despite the dangers they might face. It was this intrinsic causal force that drove the Taliban's insurgency when all other favourable exogenous conditions were yet to exist.

Second, exploring the political role of the Taliban's ideational canon can offer insightful answers to questions that realist and structuralist interpretations of the Afghan conflict fail to address. This is to hold the view that "neglecting ideology would leave major war-related phenomena unexplained" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 214). Material considerations alone cannot explain why the Taliban occasionally behaved in ways that precipitated the international isolation and destruction of their first Emirate in 2001. Nor can such considerations explain the paradox that despite the Taliban's pursuit of international normalisation, their post–2021 Emirate seems to drift further away from that goal with almost every new decree issued by their leadership.[119] Likewise, 'rational choice' analyses are ill-equipped to comprehensively account for the Taliban's imperviousness to international sanctions and economic pressures, which persists despite the group's dire need for foreign funds and assistance to address the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

Third, a focus on the Taliban's creed and ideology is important not only for its causal significance in shaping their international positioning, but also because it is often overlooked in Western discussions of the group's insurgency (see Malkasian 2021). Since the Taliban's idiosyncratic religious interpretations lie at the heart of their worldview, it is conceivable that

[119] Especially those concerning gender equality and human rights.

disregarding the role of religion in how the war in Afghanistan unfolded was meant to avoid the erroneous framing of the conflict as a clash of civilisations. Another plausible explanation could be that the Western tendency to downplay the "influence of religion on politics and war … stems from a prevalent feeling that religion is a private, not a public, matter" (Wrigley 1996, 85). The Western privatisation of religion is not universally shared in other world regions, particularly not in Afghanistan, where "Islam … is no longer just a religion, but a collective identity and unique bond that brought together disparate ethnicities" (Howeidy 2001, 14).

1.2. The Study's Premises and Scholarly Context

Having outlined the significance of this ideational approach to the Taliban's politics and legitimacy, it is important to note the underlying assumptions of this paper. Firstly, the Taliban's value system is neither static nor ahistorical phenomenon that can be properly studied in isolation from the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which the group came into being and continues to develop. In addition, it is almost impossible to get into the heads of the Taliban and define what they truly believe in or what their genuine motivations are. The interest here is not to make claims *about* the Taliban, but rather to study the claims *of* the Taliban. That is, to let them represent themselves. Lastly, the Taliban are a composite rather than a uniform group. Consequently, their political conduct arises partly from the dynamic interactions among several factions of members and leaders, each with differing levels of ideological rigidity and political adaptability.

Cognisant of the distortions in some normatively-loaded Western analyses of the Taliban, this paper considers a multitude of voices and perspectives. Whereas the study is anchored in the Taliban's own discourse and Arabic scholarship on them, it also draws on ten semi-structured interviews with Afghan, American, and European experts and officials.[120] Furthermore, diverse primary and secondary sources in English, Arabic, Pashto, and Dari (Farsi) languages are consulted. This inquiry aims to expand the scholarly contributions on rebel legitimacy, traditionally focused on domestic rather than international politics. In particular, it addresses the literature examining the role of norms, beliefs, and discourse in the legitimisation processes of armed Islamist groups (see, for instance, Boutz, Benninger, and Lancaster 2019).

Although much in the world, and in the Taliban, has changed over the last three decades, the following sections advance the argument that the Taliban's value system—notwithstanding its

[120] Interviews were conducted with some Afghan government officials, both current and former, as well as leading Afghanistan experts. These experts include Dr. Barnett Rubin, Senior Advisor to former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke, Andrew Watkins of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), and Graeme Smith of the International Crisis Group (ICG).

evolution, adaptations, and contradictions—has substantially underpinned their domestic and external fortunes. The group's international legitimacy reached its lowest point with the ousting of its government in 2001 and peaked with the Doha Agreement in 2020, culminating in the subsequent re-establishment of the Emirate in 2021. After a brief introduction to Afghanistan and the Taliban, these pivotal moments are examined.

2. From Villages to the Capital: The Taliban's Emergence and Rule

Endowed with a picturesque and rugged landscape, Afghanistan is a home to a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic communities. Most of the population resides in rural areas, where life is largely detached from the capital, Kabul. In these villages, literacy rates are low, and day-to-day affairs are governed by traditional customs and *Mullahs* (clerics). Throughout history, Afghans have fiercely resisted imperial incursions and aggressions. As Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani aptly noted in 1879, amidst the second Anglo-Afghan war, he described them as an "extremely religious" and "warrior nation" whose "nobility of soul led it to choose a death of honour over a life of baseness under the authority of the foreigners" (Al-Afghani 1879, Chapter 3). In Afghanistan, religion has always "played a principal role in the political changes" (H. Haqqani 1997, 34).

In 1994, the Taliban (religion students) emerged as a Pashtun local defence force in response to the unchecked chaos and brutality that had engulfed Kandahar since the onset of the civil war among Mujahideen factions in 1992. Many of the Taliban received their education in regional Deobandi *madrassas* (schools) of the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. According to Islamist writer Fahmy Howeidy (2001, 105–6), despite the remarkable legacy of Darul Uloom Deoband, founded in 1867 in British India, the madrassas that followed its model became bastions of intellectual stagnation, imitation of the ancestors, problematisation of women, obsession with non-essential matters of the individual's external appearance and behaviour, and absolute loyalty to the *Sheikhs* (religious leaders).

Thanks to their religious standing and their ability to restore order and quell violence, the Taliban were welcomed in various regions in Afghanistan, reaching the outskirts of the capital in less than a year of their existence. Shortly before taking over Kabul and establishing the first Emirate in September 1996, the group's founder, Mullah Mohammed Omar, declared before an *Ulama* (religious scholars) gathering in Kandahar that the Taliban's ultimate goal was "to implement the *Deen* (religion) of Allah in his land" (H. Haqqani 1997, 44). The congregation concluded with consecrating Omar as *Amir ul-Mo'mineen* (Commander of the Faithful).

The Taliban were the first religious rebels in Afghanistan's history to seize and retain power without ceding it to royals or political elites (Terpstra 2020, 1153). They ruled despite their lack of prior knowledge of state politics and administration. Not only that, but even the Taliban's "visual experience itself was so limited and poor" (Howeidy 2001, 64). They had not witnessed city life with their own eyes or lived it before they moved to urban centres as conquerors and governors. For the Taliban, their Pashtun villages appeared to be the reference model of Afghanistan and Islam. As a result, although they were devout and spartan, their political profile was insular and inept.

Ultimately, the Taliban sought to create what they believed to be a pure Islamic regime in which, through them, God rules. The victories against more experienced local adversaries, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmed Shah Massoud, reinforced the group's conviction that God was on its side and had granted it power (Sharp 2003, 484). Hence, the professed priority of the Taliban leadership was to maintain God's favour and remain vigilant against foreign influences and worldly interests that might compromise the purity of their way of life.

3. Defying the World: The Downfall of the First Emirate

As the ruling authority in Afghanistan (1996–2001), the first Emirate viewed external recognition as a natural entitlement predicated on its 'effective control' of the country. While this view seemed consonant with international law, it failed to appreciate that international practice differs. Practically, recognition of other governments has consistently been a state's discretionary choice stemming from its strategic interests and ideological character. In essence, the Taliban based their claim to legitimacy on their domestic power and appeared to believe that whatever happens within Afghanistan's borders is a matter of sovereignty unrelated to their right to international legitimacy.

At the time, it was a matter of consensus among both Westerners and Islamists that the Taliban's diplomacy and foreign policy were unsophisticated (see Cristol 2019; Howeidy 2001). Abu Musab al-Suri (1998, 29), a renowned jihadi strategist and Taliban loyalist, remarked that the group demonstrated a "general ignorance of world affairs, including regional and international politics". This knowledge deficit in conjunction with the Taliban's suspicion of outsiders and their schemes placed them on a collision course with foreign players in their region and beyond.[121]

[121] Scepticism towards external actors and their agendas is a deeply embedded feature of the Afghan political landscape. This stems from a long and tumultuous history marked by foreign interventions and incursions, a legacy that has profoundly impacted not only the Taliban, but all Afghan political actors.

3.1. Solidarity with Foreign Militants: Taliban as a Security Threat

Early on in their relationship, Taliban officials assured Osama bin Laden and the Arabs around him—who came to Afghanistan to join the 1980s anti-Soviet jihad—that "you are the *Muhajirun* [migrants] and we are the *Ansar* [supporters]" (Al-Suri 1998, 34). This pledge of solidarity invoked the exemplary brotherhood between Muslims who fled persecution in Mecca and those who sheltered them in Medina in the early days of Islam. Within Taliban circles, bin Laden was evidently regarded as a noble "servant of the Muslims" and "great Mujahid" (Mutma'in 2022, 182–83).[122] Beyond this reverence, it seems that the group's decision to shelter him was likely based on his status as a fellow Muslim and guest (see Coll 2018; Malkasian 2021). Accordingly, a potent confluence of religious and cultural precepts seems to have underpinned the Taliban's position. These were epitomised by the *Hadith* (saying) of Prophet Mohammed that "A Muslim … should not oppress [his Muslim brother], nor should he hand him over [to an oppressor]," and traditional Pashtun values (*Pashtunwali*), based on which a guest is not to be harmed or surrendered to an enemy.[123]

Like the Arabs, the Taliban also sheltered other foreign Islamist militant groups bent on challenging the territorial control or central authorities of neighbouring states. For this reason, the Taliban morphed into a security challenge to countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, India, and Iran. In December 1999, when the Indian Airlines Flight 814 was hijacked to Kandahar, Mullah Omar issued a revealing directive of the Taliban's policy priorities at the time. "If the hijackers are Muslims, we will support them according to the Sharia teachings, but if they are Hindus we will hand them over to the Indian government to establish relations with it", stated the Taliban's leader (Mutma'in 2022, 204).

Concerned about the security threats emanating from Afghanistan, neighbouring countries funded and supported the Taliban's domestic rivals, the Northern Alliance. The question remains as to whether the regional opposition to the Taliban was a cause or a result of the group's tactless policies. Yet, this has little bearing on the fact that the Taliban's self-perceptions of sovereignty, honour, hospitality, and religious brotherhood largely guided their practical reckoning.

However, despite regional unease with the Taliban, external recognition of the group was not entirely absent. On 25 May 1997, Pakistan was the first country to officially recognise the Emirate as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates

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[122] Bin Laden provided the Taliban with considerable financial and military support, including the assassination of their domestic rival, Ahmed Shah Massoud, on 9 September 2001. Arab and foreign fighters bolstered the Taliban forces and helped them in repelling major offensives against Kabul launched by other warring factions.

[123] Hadith no. 2442 in the Book of al-Mazalim (Oppressions) in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, one of the two most authoritative collections of Prophet Mohammed's sayings and deeds among Sunni Muslims.

followed suit.[124] But the Taliban failed to hold on to their few friends. The group broke its promise to the Saudis to hand over bin Laden and insulted the Saudi chief of intelligence Prince Turki al-Faisal over the issue in September 1998.[125] Pervez Musharraf (2006, 214), then president of Pakistan, acknowledged the Taliban's behaviour towards his country as a departure from conventional political norms, stating that "God knows that the Taliban gave us enough cause" to cut diplomatic ties with them. Islamabad, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi would eventually rescind their recognition of the Taliban due to the shifting dynamics in the group's relationship with al-Qaeda and the US.

Unlike most of the Taliban's neighbours, the US started off on cordial terms with the group. The two parties held numerous meetings on a range of issues, including drugs and terrorism. However, it was not until al-Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam on 7 August 1998 that the Taliban were considered beyond the pale. Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef (2010, 138), then Taliban ambassador in Pakistan, opined that the US was ready to "drop all its other demands and formally recognise the Emirate if [bin Laden] was handed over". The Taliban, nonetheless, maintained that bin Laden was innocent and refused to expel him. Then, al-Qaeda attacked the US on 11 September 2001 and a new era for Afghanistan and international politics was heralded.

On 20 September 2001, the Emirate's existence was put in jeopardy by President George W. Bush's (2001) ultimatum to the Taliban to "hand over the terrorists or … share in their fate." To better understand how the Taliban would handle the crisis, it is pertinent to remember that Pakistan was also confronted with a similar choice: "you're either with us or you're not" (State Department 2001). In response, President Musharraf, in his account, faced a difficult decision. His instrumentally rational choice was to abandon Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban and join the so-called war on terror on the side of the US to protect his country and advance its national interests (Musharraf 2006, 201).

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[124] These countries' decision to officially recognise the Taliban was likely influenced by a constellation of geopolitical calculations. These included containing the regional influence of Iran, a long-standing competitor of Saudi Arabia, and India, a historical rival of Pakistan. Additionally, the anticipation that the Taliban would cooperate in stemming drug trafficking and fostering stability in Afghanistan, conducive to regional trade and economic development, likely played a role.

[125] A June 1998 meeting between Prince Turki al-Faisal, and Mullah Omar initially suggested a path towards Osama bin Laden's extradition, then a pressing issue due to his threats against the Saudi royal family (*Der Spiegel* 2004). However, by 19 September, following the US embassy bombings in Africa, tensions had risen dramatically. Prince al-Faisal, frustrated by the lack of progress, met Mullah Omar again and demanded action. Instead of addressing the concerns of one of his few allies in the world, Mullah Omar scathingly rebuked al-Faisal, accusing Saudi Arabia of working on behalf of the 'infidels': "Persecuted Muslims are waiting for your help ... On the contrary, you turn the Muslims over to the enemies, you came here on their orders" (Mutma'in 2022, 174). This fiery exchange exposed the ideological schism and fracturing relationship between Riyadh and Kabul, ultimately leading to a severing of diplomatic ties.

The Taliban's interpretation of the American threat differed: they saw it as a forced choice between preserving their government or worldview. The stance of Mullah Omar was clear: "We will not ask Osama to leave or turn himself in. … We understand that [the Americans] can badly damage us but their demands are more devastating for our religion and faith" (Mutma'in 2022, 229–30). Considering the imminent war to be "the will of God" (Coll 2018, 61), Mullah Omar led the Taliban to sacrifice their lives and regime for what they believed in. With no single nation on their side, the Taliban fell shortly after the US invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001.

3.2. The Taliban's Purist Utopia: A Negation of Western Norms

The Emirate's relations with the West were tense. Not bereft of justification, the Taliban didn't believe that the Western denial of its legitimacy was due to its repressive domestic rule (Harpviken 1999, 866). After all, the Burhanuddin Rabbani government, which the Taliban toppled in 1996, and other regimes with dismal human rights records were unreservedly recognised globally. The group had a different explanation of such denial. This was the "inveterate rancour against Islam" of the West, which would not embrace the Taliban until they abandoned their principles and religion (Howeidy 2001, 71). An *Ayah* (verse from the Quran) that Taliban members would occasionally cite to back this conclusion was one addressed to the Prophet, telling him that non-Muslims "will never be satisfied with you until you follow their way."[126] The Taliban's choice was to stick to their values, because "no one has ever abandoned them and gained anything, not even the satisfaction of the infidel [Western] states" (van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018, 261).

Nevertheless, the Taliban sought to join these states at the United Nations. They understood that seizing Afghanistan's UN seat from the Rabbani government would legitimise and consolidate their domestic rule (Al-Suri 1998, 108–9). Although the group's endeavour to join the international body was unsuccessful, it was a point of contention with its foreign jihadi companions, who viewed UN membership as a violation of the concept of *Hakimiyyah* (the supremacy of God's sovereignty and rule) in favour of international principles and regulations. In defence, the Taliban claimed that they had appended a condition to their UN credentials that their government would not abide by any UN document or rule contradicting the Sharia (ibid., 112).

In international media, the Taliban were often presented as the reification of the "enemy picture of Islam" that is so dominant in the West (Harpviken 1999, 864). Positive aspects of their rule, like prohibiting opium cultivation and pacifying Afghanistan, were mostly overlooked. Instead, the attention was focused on the practices of the group's *Hisba* (morality police) who

[126] Ayah 120, *Surat* (chapter) al-Baqarah.

administered severe public punishments, including amputations, stonings, and lashings of wrongdoers. Women, in particular, endured cruel restrictions, such as beating for wearing improper attire, bans on education and work, and limited access to healthcare.

In the preceding years, despite the Mujahideen's gender policy resembling that of the Taliban, Western attention prioritised supporting the Mujahideen against the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Communist state and the global rise of the ideals of human rights and democracy, the world started to closely examine the Taliban's treatment of women. The historical momentum was on the side of international feminist and human rights organisations, which called for the isolation and penalisation of the Taliban. Although the anti-Taliban advocacy campaign was most resonant in Washington, in the US-Taliban meetings, women's rights took a back seat to the bin Laden issue. When the US sanctioned the Taliban in 1999, the cited reason was the group's "support of Usama bin Ladin", and not their violations of the Afghans' rights and freedoms (Clinton 1999). The US and international ostracism of the Taliban continued until the Emirate was overthrown in 2001.

4. Dazzling the World: The Rise of the Second Emirate

By December 2001, the Taliban were defeated and the Bonn Agreement gave Afghanistan a new foreign-backed regime led by Hamid Karzai. The rapid collapse of the Emirate and the initial enthusiasm for the new government made the Americans believe that they conclusively triumphed. But it was not long before the Taliban re-grouped and launched their 'defensive jihad' against US and NATO forces. Within two decades of the insurgency, a dazzling shift in the dynamics of the Afghan conflict and the international standing of the Taliban occurred when the US extended an olive branch to them in February 2020. This transition would not have happened without the Taliban's resilience in both battle and governance. The potential role of the group's identity and cultural beliefs in their resurgence is explored in the following paragraphs.

4.1. The Strength Within: The Crux of the Taliban's Military Resilience

"It is not enough to fight. It is the spirit, which we bring to the fight that decides the issue. It is *morale* that wins the victory" (Vaughn 1983, 28). These words of US general and statesman George C. Marshall underscore the importance of some factors that various investigations of the Taliban revival overlook. These are the non-material sources of power and resilience derived from the

warriors' beliefs, "for it is what men *believe* that makes them invincible."[127] With this in mind, it becomes pertinent to enquire: what did the Taliban—both in words and deeds—claim to believe?

The Taliban posited that their jihad against the US is an anti-colonial resistance and a sequel to their countrymen's freedom struggle against the Russians and the British in earlier times (Baradar 2023). In this way, the rebellion, in and of itself, had for the Taliban what Timur Kuran (1995, 30) calls "expressive utility." That is, the armed insurgency served to voice the rebels' rejection to live a "reduced mode of being" (Varshney 2003, 93), suffering humiliation and cruelty under foreign rule. The "righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul" (Gamson 1992, 32) triggered the determination of some insurgents to give, in blood, an unequivocal expression of their self-worth and values. This is further underscored by the fact that the Taliban were an army of volunteers, who—at least until very late in the insurgency—expected to lose much and gain little, if anything, in the material sense.

Quoting the millennia-old declaration of the legendary Muslim commander Khalid ibn al-Walid to the Persians, the Taliban warned the Americans that "[we] love death as you love life" and that in jihad there is no defeat, only "victory or martyrdom" (*Al-Somood Magazine* 2011, 1). Both ends are described in the Quran as "the two best things".[128] Seeking martyrdom—the apex of value-rationality—featured prominently in the Taliban's speech and operations. Hibatullah Akhundzada (2016, 3), the Taliban's current *Amir* (supreme leader), cautioned "the American occupiers" in July 2016 that the Afghans "consider martyrdom in confrontation with you a cherished goal of their life." This statement echoed that of Mullah Omar's Eid al-Adha message in 2011: "Our people do not bow to foreigners, nor do they accept retreating from their stance and beliefs … Life is not so dear to us that we would sacrifice our religion for it. Verily, our lives and our deaths both were and will be for God" (Omar 2011, 3).

In a February 2023 conversation, a martyrdom operative (suicide bomber), who signed up for the mission but the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan had occurred before his name topped the martyrs-in-waiting list, vented frustration with his new role in life as a government worker: "Martyrdom would make me much happier than being a bureaucrat" (Oaks 2023). The Taliban's death-embracing attitude sharply contrasted with the focus of Western forces on having no casualties. "How do you win a war without casualties?", questioned Gilles Dorronsoro on the conflicting logics of these forces: defeating the insurgent Taliban and incurring no human losses (Carnegie Endowment 2010, [09:02]).

[127] George C. Marshall, quoted in Congressional Record (1964, 22548, emphasis added), Vol. 110, Part 17.
[128] Aya 52, Surat al-Tawbah.

A force multiplier of the Taliban's morale was the remarkable internal unity that dovetailed their multiple command centres. Members of the group strictly followed the Quranic orders to the believers to "obey" their leaders[129] and refrain from internal disputes "lest you lose heart and your power depart".[130] The Taliban were not oblivious to the manner in which partisanship and internal discord fractured the ranks of the Mujahedeen and led the nation into a harrowing civil war. Consequently, they regarded internal cohesiveness and absolute subservience to the commanders as the way to secure the "moral victory in jihad" (A. A. Akhundzada 2016, 34–35). The renowned Taliban top commander Jalaluddin Haqqani believed that "unity was the reason why the whole world failed" to defeat the group.[131] The Taliban's 2010 *Layeha* (code of conduct) was also clear evidence of their "obsession with group cohesion and consolidation" (Johnson, DuPee, and Shaaker 2017, 191).

The Taliban's commitment to what they considered their core values had detrimental consequences for their international politics as rulers, but it provided them with immense resilience as insurgents. Many Taliban combatants perceived the battlefield as a stage where righteousness and malevolence clashed. Empowered by this Manichean certainty, they persisted on the field with fierce determination and sacrificed their lives for their cause.

However, if the Taliban's sole advantage had been their morale and battlefield performance, the US military power could have neutralised it. Yet, during the 20-year occupation of Afghanistan, diverse domestic and foreign conditions contributed to the insurgency's expansion and triumph. Chief among these, though beyond the scope of this article, is the shift of Washington's primary national security interest from counter-terrorism to great power rivalry with Beijing.

4.2. Legitimacy by Contrast: Enemies and Neighbours for the Taliban

The struggle for Afghanistan extended beyond the battlefield to the realm of governance values and practices. The Taliban's on-the-ground actions seamlessly synchronised with their articulated commitments to liberating Afghanistan and establishing an Islamic government. In stark contrast, the conduct of the US eroded the trust in its professed aim to help the Afghans in building a modern state, rendering it mere empty rhetoric.

Despite an initial tide of hope, the legitimacy of the US liberal democratic project was quickly called into question. The US collaborated with local strongmen and warlords, infamous

[129] Aya 59, Surat al-Nisa'.
[130] Aya 46, Surat al-Anfal.
[131] Quoted by his son Sirajuddin Haqqani, then deputy Amir of the Taliban in *Al-Somood Magazine* (2016, 6).

for drug trafficking, predation, and corruption, to lead the new regime (Coll 2018, 268). The Afghan police, tasked with protecting civilians, were perceived by the people as "the main criminals" (Rubin 2007, 67). The justice system was vulnerable to bribery and external influences. National elections were marred by fraud, with foreigners, not Afghans, deciding the winner of the highest office (SIGAR 2022, 36). Reflecting the extent of incompetence and malpractices within the Afghan Republic, former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2023, Chapter 16) once joked that "corruption was "a feature, not a bug," as it was all that held the government together."

Kabul failed to dispel its depiction as a Western puppet by the Taliban. It was unable to protect innocent Afghan lives from being lost in American night raids and air strikes. The Republic also could not safeguard the livelihoods of small farmers and loggers, which were affected by poorly-conceived American anti-drugs policies.

Despite substantial influx of foreign capital into Afghanistan, benefiting select groups in Kabul and beyond, the average Afghan still struggled to attain security and dignity in their life. The actions of the US and its local allies inadvertently lent credence to the Taliban's claims regarding the inhumanity of the US occupation, the moral bankruptcy of Western democracy, and the assault on Afghanistan's Islamic identity (see Al-Sharky 2006, 24). Incidents such as the burning of copies of the Quran at Bagram prison and the desecration of Taliban corpses by US soldiers in 2012 served as catalysts, inciting religious fervour among many Afghans and dealing a crushing blow to the self-respect of those who were cooperating with foreigners.

Consequently, the legitimacy of the insurgency was rising with every perceived injustice inflicted on the defenceless people by foreign forces and the warlords. Not inconceivably, many Afghans joined the ranks of the Taliban who appeared to protect the villagers, and fight for Islam and the Afghan way of life. The Taliban's shadow policing and Sharia courts in particular were highly popular due to their perceived relative impartiality, efficiency, and conformity with the culture and beliefs of most rural Afghans. Many analysts argue that the insurgent Taliban's legal order has significantly contributed to the legitimation and triumph of the group (see Baczko 2021).

Furthermore, with the Pakistanis resuming their crucial support for the Taliban around 2003, the local popularity of the group fuelled the durability of its military campaign.[132] This, from 2005 onwards, encouraged some regional countries, such as Iran, to gradually back the anti-US insurgency, and some European diplomats to clandestinely engage with the Taliban within the next biennium. Nonetheless, it was the ineffectiveness of the 2009-2011 US troop surge in quelling the

[132] Pakistan became increasingly alarmed by the consolidation of Indian influence in Kabul with the rise of the Northern Alliance, a long-standing Indian ally, to power in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The US focus shifting in 2003 towards Iraq further heightened these concerns. In response, Pakistan recalibrated its regional strategy and renewed its support for the Taliban.

insurgency that prompted then US President Barack Obama to recognise that the military destruction of the Taliban was no longer a feasible objective. As a consequence, exploratory direct meetings between the US and the Taliban started on 28 November 2010 in Munich, Germany (Coll 2018). These talks would mark the inception of a decade of cumulative mainstreaming of the group as a principal political force in Afghanistan.

Throughout this decade, opposition to both *Daesh* (the Islamic State in Khorasan Province, ISKP) and the US presence in Afghanistan broadened the Taliban's regional appeal, turning some of their former enemies into allies (see Akbarzadeh and Ibrahimi 2020). Russia opened up to the group in 2014, eyeing a common ground in their desire for the US departure from the region (Mujahid 2016, 6). This rapprochement was further facilitated by the emergence of a Daesh affiliate in eastern Afghanistan between 2014 and 2015, which posed a threat to regional security and stability. The Russian Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, noted that the interests of Russia and the Taliban "objectively coincide" in combatting Daesh (Reuters Staff 2015).

Indeed, the Daesh phenomenon had a universal legitimising effect on its competitor jihadi groups in Syria and elsewhere. It made them appear, in comparison, more tolerant and reasonable—"moderate extremists" (Hoffman 2018). The Taliban were no exception. With Daesh's attacks on European capitals like Paris, Brussels, and Berlin, some international perceptions of the Taliban as a lesser evil were taking shape. Capitalizing on this perceptual shift, the Taliban leveraged their anti-Daesh operations while reinforcing their self-representation as a nationalist and Islamic organisation that would pose no harm to anyone once Afghanistan was liberated.

4.3. On Their Own Terms: The Taliban's Doha Diplomatic Triumph

Before the Obama administration steered its Afghanistan policy towards peace negotiations, reconciliation with the Taliban had been President Karzai's "dream throughout his presidency" (Partlow 2016, 381). However, the Taliban did not reciprocate. They were acutely aware that negotiating with Karzai would "confer legitimacy on [his] puppet government" (Ghaznawi 2009, 14). Therefore, excluding the Afghan government from peace talks was one of several red lines that the Taliban imposed, and the Americans never crossed.

During these talks, the 'conventional' Taliban showed no inclination to compromise on their demands. Neither did they accept any request that could tarnish their doctrinal purity or jihadi legitimacy. For instance, the group declined to break from al-Qaeda because "it is impossible … to "cut ties" with any Muslim" (Rubin 2022). This was a remarkable position, especially when contrasted with that of *Jabhat al-Nusra*, the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, which severed ties with its

parent organisation in July 2016, "recognizing that the costs of al-Qaida membership outweigh the benefits" (Watts 2015). Put differently, the Taliban's unwavering prioritisation of ideology over realpolitik reveals a doctrinal rigidity exceeding even that of some within al-Qaeda fold.

Nonetheless, several aspects have also been 'unconventional' in the insurgent Taliban. Unlike the first generation, who hung televisions and cassette tapes from trees and were cut off from the wider world, the rebel generation embraced new technologies. They used social media, emails, and mobile phones to connect with, and propagate their messages to, the globe. The multi-lingual *Alemarah* website and the Arabic *Al-Somood* magazine, launched in 2005 and 2006 respectively, offer a glimpse into the evolution and sophistication of the post-2001 Taliban. Learning from past lessons, particularly in utilising media and communication means, the Taliban cadres developed into more political and expressive beings. They adapted their messaging to resonate with both neighbouring and Western audiences. In the group's new discourse, concepts such as sovereignty, independence, international law, human rights, economic development, and even environmental concerns co-existed with its persistent dogmatic narratives of the conflict (see Al-Baluchi 2017, 18).

This is not to say, as Gopal and van Linschoten (2017, 44) claim, that the Taliban's "views have broadened and morphed into an ideology that appears much closer … to mainstream Islamism … in the Arab world." It was the Taliban's rhetoric, rather than their ideology, that resembled that of some political Islamists. In fact, if the insurgents were drawing closer to any group, it was foreign Islamist fighters. These fighters were the comrades in arms against Western forces, from whom the Taliban learned how to appropriate new media tools and guerrilla warfare techniques. Still, the Taliban's experience—as refugees, insurgents, emissaries, and leaders—exposed them to different shades of Islamist and political influences in Pakistan, Iran, the Gulf States and elsewhere. This unprecedented interaction with the outside world considerably bolstered the group's knowledge and politicisation.

Substantively, the Taliban were not approaching mainstream Islamism. Instead, they pioneered a jihadi trend in which the struggle is nationally bounded and strategically communicated.[133] The Taliban leveraged present-day technologies and contemporary political parlance to outwardly legitimise their cause. In doing so, they used different political communication tactics such as what can be referred to as *resonant narratives* and *calculated ambiguity*.

[133] Prioritising the 'near enemy,' domestic ruling elites, over the 'far enemy,' Western powers, is not new in jihadi discourse. This debate has been a persistent theme within the broader jihadi current for decades (for more details, see McGregor 2003). However, the Taliban's persistent focus on battling US and NATO forces solely on Afghan soil, coupled with their modernised communication strategies, has effectively revived this nationally-bounded approach as a potential path forward for contemporary jihadi movements. Indeed, groups, such as Syria's *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, would be inspired by the Taliban's way.

The first is about framing the conflict in universally legitimate ideals like freedom and justice, akin to the discourse of ordinary national liberation movements or political parties. The second is prone to favourable interpretations from disparate audiences. For instance, the July 2015 Eid al-Fitr message of Mullah Omar enunciated that "out of our religious responsibility, we [the Taliban] recognise all the legitimate rights of all Afghans, including minorities" (*Al-Somood Magazine* 2015a, 3).[134] While both the Taliban's supporters and detractors may have converged on praising this announcement, they likely diverged on what constitutes 'legitimate rights'.

The more experienced and knowledgeable Taliban reached out to the US in 2010 to achieve what had been hitherto unattainable through the force of arms. They sent a message to President Obama outlining "the necessary steps required for confidence building" (Coll 2018, 563–64). These steps included releasing the Taliban's Guantanamo prisoners, lifting sanctions, and opening a political bureau for the group in Qatar. The US granted them most of what they had demanded. On 18 June 2013, the Taliban's representation bureau in Doha was inaugurated. The office carried the name of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan' and flew its white and black flag, which sparked Karzai's fury against this "attempt to confer legitimacy on the insurgents" *(BBC News* 2013). The Americans requested the removal of the nameplate and the banner, but the Taliban did not acquiesce, and the office was eventually shut down. Still, this development marked a turning point that highlighted the Taliban's political weight and broke their international isolation. Since then, engaging with the group has no longer been universally tabooed or stigmatised.

While the Taliban's open talks with the Americans stalled, their dialogue with regional and Western interlocutors continued. Some European states sought to assist the Taliban and the Kabul government in developing their negotiation capacities to facilitate the peace talks. In 2015, the Taliban met with delegations representing Afghan civil society and human rights organisations in different capitals like Doha and Oslo. They also met Kabul officials for the first time in Murree, Pakistan, on 15 July that year in the presence of American and Chinese observers (International Crisis Group 2021, 5).

At the time, the Taliban were facing external religious outbidding from Daesh and internal unrest surrounding the leadership succession after the death of Mullah Omar in 2013. To dispel any confusion about the Taliban's character under his command, the new Amir, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, reminded the group's commanders and fighters that "[w]e—besides the armed struggle—engage in politics but in the right time and according to the conditions defined by the Islamic Sharia, … this who wants to reconcile with us must submit to our demands … we will

[134] The Taliban published the message in the name of Mullah Omar, who was actually dead at the time.

continue our jihad until the Book of Allah rules the land of Afghanistan … and these are among our principles that we will never compromise on" (*Al-Somood Magazine* 2015b, 4). This statement encapsulated the Taliban's perspective on politics and negotiations.

Therefore, when the Trump administration resumed overt diplomatic talks with the Taliban in September 2018, the group remained unyielding. A year earlier, President Trump tried to intimidate the Taliban by increasing the number of US troops in Afghanistan and relaxing restrictions on US airstrikes against the group. In response to the US belligerence, the Taliban published an open letter to the American people on 14 February 2018. In this letter, they framed their rebellion in terms of "international rules", "national sovereignty", "natural and human right[s]", and "the right to form a government consistent with the beliefs of our people" (Mujahid 2018). They also reaffirmed their commitment to prevent threats to others from Afghanistan and to have positive relations with all countries.

The Taliban faced Trump's 'strategic confusion' with 'strategic patience,' until his failed military escalation and impatience with the war brought him back to the negotiations table. In the latest round, Washington's demand that the Taliban renounce al-Qaeda was once again rejected. They even denied that al-Qaeda was the perpetrator of the 11 September attacks despite bin Laden's admission of responsibility in 2004 (*Wall Street Journal* 2004). The Taliban additionally reiterated their refusal to negotiate with the Kabul government and insisted on omitting any reference to it in the forthcoming agreement.

After Zalmay Khalilzad, then top US envoy to Afghanistan, was ordered to secure a withdrawal arrangement at any cost, various US objectives were forfeited, and a draft agreement, largely in line with the Taliban's conditions, was finalised.[135] On 29 February 2020, the US and the Taliban signed a withdrawal and peace accord, commonly known as the Doha Agreement. In this accord, the US government effectively positioned the Taliban on par with the Afghan government in Kabul, recognising them as a principal Afghan political force. However, Washington expressly refused to confer legitimacy on the group as a potential governing body.

5. The Emirate in Two Worlds: Antagonistic West and Cordial Region?

The Doha Agreement delivered a clear message to domestic and international stakeholders that the US was disengaging from its client regime in Kabul. The accord also foreshadowed the Taliban's imminent return to power. Interested parties subsequently recalibrated their assessments,

[135] For instance, the US ultimately abandoned its objective of maintaining counter-terrorism and intelligence-gathering capabilities in Afghanistan following its withdrawal.

increasingly hedging their bets by acknowledging the Taliban's seemingly unstoppable rise. By 15 August 2021, the combined effects of this accord and the Taliban's rapid territorial gains culminated in the downfall of the Republic and the reinstatement of the Islamic Emirate.

Before, and shortly after, the re-establishment of the Emirate, the Taliban continued to assure the world about their future regime. "We are committed to … a new, inclusive political system … in which all Afghans have equal rights," wrote Sirajuddin Haqqani (2020) in the *New York Times*. In his July 2020 Eid al-Adha message, Amir Akhundzada (2020, 3–4) stated that the Islamic Emirate "wants good dealings with all countries" and that "we do not think about monopoly of power". A message to the American people from the Taliban's co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar in 2021 reiterated that the Emirate is committed to "guarantee all women rights" and "freedom of expression" according to the Sharia (Baradar 2021). Despite this rhetoric's appeal, the rights and freedoms that the Taliban pledged to ensure were not clear. This is not because of the omnipresent safeguard clauses like 'according to Islam' or 'within the framework of the Sharia,' in the Taliban's statements and speeches, but because 'Islam' and 'Sharia' in this context are what the Taliban interpret them to be.

However, the Taliban's chief justice, Sheikh Abdul Hakim Haqqani, dispelled much of this confusion in April 2022 by offering a rare, detailed look into the group's governance theory and aspirations with his book, *The Islamic Emirate and Its System*. This publication introduced a form of articulation previously absent in the Taliban's intellectual repertoire—a 'credo' of sorts. The fact that the book's foreword was written by the Amir, and its chapters were reviewed and endorsed by the Ulama, highlights this work's representative and canonical status within the group. It stands as a significant exposition of the political worldview of the Taliban, or at the very least of their more doctrinaire circle, to which Abdul Hakim and Akhundzada belong.

A thorough reading of this treatise reveals some key insights. First, the Taliban view their Emirate as the world's *only* truly Islamic system. Unlike all other "revenue-generating governments," the Emirate is a "guiding government" whose mission is to guide people towards God, improve their morals, and enjoin good and forbid evil (A. H. Haqqani 2022, 20–21). "Guarding the religion" is the Emirate's overriding priority (ibid., 44). Second, in the Emirate, some human rights take on atypical meanings. For instance, freedom of expression means that "every Muslim has the right to explain the precepts of Islam and communicate its provisions" and "not … that everyone has a right to promote [whatever] he wants" (ibid., 42-43).

Third, some centuries-old political thoughts, institutions, and strictures are revived. The 'will of the people' and 'popular sovereignty' are considered impious and polytheistic concepts because the exclusive prerogative to authority and legislation "belongs to no one but God" (ibid.,

27, 160). As such, contemporary elections are un-Islamic and "part of the *Jahili* (ignorant) democratic system imported from the infidels" (ibid., 70). Therefore, the Amir is to be chosen only by a coterie of Ulama and notable figures (*Ahl al-Hall wal 'Aqd*) for a lifetime tenure. Ordinary people, including women, have no right to participate in this selection process (ibid., 47-8). As a general matter, women's involvement in politics "is not permissible" because their innate duty is to stay at home to bear and raise children (ibid., 151). Finally, the Taliban harbour deep suspicions of contemporary education. They believe that delving deep into modern sciences is "destructive for the belief" (ibid., 242) and that allowing pupils to study them separately from religious ones is "an egregious harm" (ibid., 246).

On the ground, the Taliban turned their ideas into practical actions, including reinstating public corporal punishments, curtailing media freedom, and persecuting the Shiite Hazara minority. Girls and women, in particular, have borne the brunt of a series of edicts aimed at erasing their presence from public life (United States Institute of Peace 2023). The Taliban's directives banned them not only from schools, universities, workplaces, but also from recreational facilities and even female-exclusive spaces like beauty salons. The UN described the Taliban's prohibition of Afghan women from working for the Organisation as "unlawful under international law", forcing the UN "to make an appalling choice" between helping the Afghan people and upholding international norms (UNAMA 2023).

Just as in the 1990s, the Taliban's aspiration to live by what they believe to be the true "Islamic rules" and "unadulterated Afghan culture" (ARTE 2023, [08:05]) puts them at odds with cultural and religious perceptions of many non-Pashtun Afghans. Moreover, it contradicts certain universal human rights and Western norms, which poses normative challenges for democratic countries engaging with the Emirate. An official acceptance or endorsement of the Taliban government could provoke domestic backlash from concerned citizens and lead to unfavourable electoral consequences for incumbent governments in these countries.

For some reason, this is not the case with other authoritarian and sectarian regimes with which the West maintains good relations. One notable difference is the entrenched negative portrayal of the Taliban as 'the enemy other' in Western media and public perception. The Western press rightly devotes extensive coverage to the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the harsh living conditions endured by millions of people under the Taliban rule. This crisis has worsened due to economic sanctions, sharp reduction in international aid, and natural disasters. In contrast, the noteworthy efforts of the Taliban to stabilise the economy, enhance citizen security, and combat narcotics often receive limited or sceptical media attention. In this context, any earnest

attempt to normalise relations with the Taliban in Western capitals constitutes a risky political gamble (see Allegretti 2023).

Regardless, the Taliban persist in pursuing external legitimacy on their terms. They continue to tighten their domestic grip while calling on the US and other nations to lift sanctions and work with them (Muttaqi 2023a). The US views the Taliban's belief that they can take "draconian, barbaric steps" against women and minorities while simultaneously seeking "a path to improved [international] relations" as a "faulty illusion" (Price 2023). In the State Department spokesperson's words, the Taliban "cannot expect to have it both ways" (ibid.).

Still, a major concern for the US is the security conundrum in Afghanistan. The Taliban still shelter groups such as al-Qaeda and the anti-Pakistan *Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan* (TTP). The upsurge in TTP attacks against Pakistan, and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in Kabul after the Taliban seized power cast doubt on the credibility of the Emirate's counter-terrorism commitments (SIGAR 2023, 123). Given that most foreign fighters in Afghanistan—except Daesh—have pledged loyalty to the Taliban and fought alongside them for the past 20 years, it seems unlikely that the Emirate would forcefully target these allies.[136] China, Russia, Pakistan, and Iran have consistently voiced their shared security anxieties regarding the presence of groups like the anti-China *Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement* (ETIM), TTP, and Daesh within Afghanistan (*MFA China* 2023).

These countries, nonetheless, have kept their embassies in Kabul open and permitted Taliban-approved diplomats on their soil, effectively amounting to a quasi-official recognition of Taliban rule. Through both discursive and practical means, this quartet, along with other states like Uzbekistan and Qatar, have effectively been normalising the status of the Emirate in regional politics. For instance, neighbouring countries often describe the Taliban as "the Afghan interim government" (ibid.) or "the interim Afghan authorities" (*MFA Uzbekistan* 2023). They also engage in high-level official meetings with Taliban leaders, who are frequently invited to participate in regional forums and initiatives. Among these are regular meetings of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbouring states and China's Belt and Road Forum. Undeterred by the gulf of values separating the Taliban from the Western world, regional countries have demonstrated their readiness to deepen their ties with the group, for they stand to benefit from Afghanistan's stability and integration into regional connectivity projects.

Notably, for China, the significance of Afghanistan may extend beyond direct economic and security objectives. As an aspiring global power, China seeks to bolster its influence and weaken that of the US in Asia. Beijing also endeavours to establish itself as a diplomatic and soft

[136] In August 2023, the Taliban decreed that cross-border attacks on Pakistan are not jihad (*Dawn* 2023).

power counter-weight to Washington by highlighting the distinction between their roles in international politics. Contrary to the US legacy of war, human suffering, and disregard for Afghan culture, China promotes its engagement with the Taliban as a peaceful, mutually beneficial partnership aimed at fostering development in Afghanistan without violating its sovereignty or interfering in its internal affairs (*PRC Embassy in Afghanistan* 2023).

On the heels of the US "failure" in Afghanistan (Observer Network 2021), China's potential contribution to improving the well-being of Afghans could boost its self-portrayal as a champion for stability and prosperity on the world stage. Towards this end, and in a significant upgrade of the Chinese-Afghan relations, Chinese President Xi Jinping received the credentials of the Islamic Emirate's ambassador Bilal Karimi to Beijing in January 2024. This diplomatic recognition appears not only as a calculated manoeuvre to safeguard Beijing's interests in Afghanistan but also to assert its leadership through a ground-breaking initiative that no other country has undertaken thus far. Despite deepening its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, China has meticulously avoided framing this as formal recognition of their government. This cautious approach likely reflects lingering doubts about the group, while allowing China to leverage the prospect of 'official recognition' in future dealings with the Emirate.[137] In practice, however, Beijing's interactions with the Islamic Emirate resemble those with a legitimate government.

It is worth noting that Beijing and Kabul share a common aspiration for a global order that prioritises Westphalian norms of national sovereignty and non-intervention in the affairs of other states, over human rights and democratic governance. This is important because China's ascendance has disrupted long-established liberal international order, opening a possibility for a different world system to emerge. In this changing global context, the Taliban may find themselves in a more favourable position to gain international recognition compared to the 1990s, a period marked by the unrivalled supremacy of US power and norms.

In April 2023, the Taliban's foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (2023b) delivered a speech in Samarqand, Uzbekistan, asserting that "our region particularly, will play a key role in this new world order." Implicit in his statement was the claim that both supporting the Taliban and recognising their government would be important for achieving this potential regional role. Muttaqi maintained that the Emirate functions as a force for stability in Afghanistan and

[137] Following President Xi Jinping's reception of Karimi, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin was asked whether this move constituted a formal recognition of the Taliban (*MFA China* 2024). In response, Wenbin framed the act as a "normal diplomatic arrangement" for receiving an ambassador from the "Afghan interim government" (ibid.). This normality, in itself, is essentially what recognition is about. However, in his follow up, Wenbin deflected the question: "You asked whether China officially recognizes the Afghan interim government, I would like to say that China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community" (ibid.).

cooperation in the region (ibid.). He cautioned that any alternative to the Taliban government could result in a turbulent descent into regional instability and crises (ibid.).

The Taliban is currently the sole authority in Afghanistan. This fact means, in the words of Iran's former ambassador in Kabul, Bahadur Aminian, that Iran—and other countries with interests in Afghanistan—"has no choice but to work with" them (*Afghanistan International* 2022). Aminian acknowledged this reality even as he described the group as "a disaster" and likened it to "the Mongol army" that needs to become civilised (ibid.). Plausibly, then, the longer the Taliban government maintains a firm grip on power, the higher the likelihood of its recognition by other nations in the future.

Although no country has yet officially recognised the Emirate as a legitimate government, the Taliban are aware that any future recognition, if it were to happen, would likely originate in their region. For this reason, they have anchored their diplomacy and public relations in the language of political neutrality, shared economic gains, and regional stability and security. The Taliban's apparent willingness to address the concerns and interests of regional states, particularly China, marks a significant departure from their dogmatic and dismissive attitude towards their neighbours during the 1990s.

However, the Taliban's belligerence and sense of insecurity, possibly due to wider isolation and lack of recognition, have paradoxically fuelled their occasional border clashes with some neighbours, particularly Iran and Pakistan. This seemingly serves as one way for the group to over-asserts its national pride, autonomy, and sovereignty. In addition, the Taliban have rejected or ignored the demands that they considered incompatible with their worldview such as breaking with militant groups, building a broad-based government, and respecting women's rights. These requirements for upgrading the Emirate's international standing were put forward not only by the US and the West, but also by China, Russia, and regional countries.

Indeed, the group's intransigence makes it reputationally damaging for other countries to officially or explicitly recognise them, leaving even their closest interlocutors cautious, if not suspicious. This intransigence also appears to be a factor in the delay of the UN Credentials Committee's decision on Afghanistan's UN seat, despite the Taliban's undisputed control of the country, as acknowledged by former president Ashraf Ghani himself (*Reuters* 2021). Should they be granted a seat at the UN, it would be an unprecedented, almost irreversible recognition of the legitimacy of the Emirate.

Ultimately, the Taliban could have improved their global reputation by fulfilling promises made in Doha, such as allowing girls to attend schools and women to work, which are consistent with Islamic teachings (Afghanistan News 2022). However, it seems that Kandahari doctrinaires

within the group exert more influence in internal debates over these matters than the governors in Kabul or the diplomats in Doha. The doctrinaires seem to place little value on external acceptance or recognition, fearing that extensive interaction and cooperation with foreigners may compromise the purity of their belief system.[138] On several occasions, Amir Akhundzada made it clear that he will not engage with the external world in any way that would contravene Sharia law as interpreted by the Taliban (Gul 2023): "We pledged to Allah … [to] refrain from taking any action that endangers, undermines Islam" (*Tolo News* 2023).

6. Conclusion

In the Taliban's triumphant odyssey between 1994 and 2023, the group's political worldview and value rationality have played a significant—though not exclusive—role in shaping their international fortunes. Although the Taliban have evolved throughout the years as political and expressive actors, the unwavering commitment to their idiosyncratic national identity and ideological beliefs has proved to be a double-edged sword in their quest for international recognition.

As insurgents (2001–2021), the Taliban's ideational canon was an immense source of resilience in the fields of battle and governance. Their fighters' morale and pursuit of martyrdom in defence of their creed and dignity endowed them with an invincibility that Afghan and foreign adversaries seemed to lack. It was the group's internal righteous anger that initially drove the insurgency when all other supportive exogenous conditions were yet to exist. The Taliban's combat capability played a role in facilitating the Doha Agreement. This accord legitimised the group as the pre-eminent Afghan political power. The subsequent takeover of Kabul, while not enough to generate formal recognition from other states, was essential for the Taliban's claim to be Afghanistan's legitimate ruling power.

Throughout the protracted years of insurgency, the Taliban's organisational and communicative strategies have progressed significantly. Leveraging modern technologies, they have incorporated non-dogmatic discourses to promote their insurgency as a just struggle for independence, national sovereignty, and prosperity of Afghans. The group has adeptly tailored its external messages to address regional and international concerns and present itself as a responsible political actor.

[138] The opposition of these rigorists to moderate policies, even those mainstream within the Muslim world, stems from a self-perceived role as guardians of doctrinal purity. They view any concession, however minor, as a potential gateway to religious decline.

As rulers (1996–2001 and 2021–present), the Taliban's policies, shaped by their unique doctrinal interpretations and cultural principles, put them in conflict with international values of human rights and democracy. These policies also led some regional and global powers to view the group as a security threat. This culminated in the US-led overthrow of the first Emirate, and the persistent perceptions of the second Emirate as a normative and security liability. However, the Taliban's record of enduring twenty years of US military coercion and the absence of viable alternatives to their post-2021 rule have compelled many countries to engage with them. China and Afghanistan's neighbours established diplomatic and commercial ties with the group and normalised its participation in regional forums. In contrast, the US and the West adopted a more sceptical and adversarial stance.

Despite the Taliban's disregard for the demands of both regional and international actors to sever ties with foreign militants, establish a representative government, and uphold human rights, they are cognisant that their best chance for gaining official recognition lies within their region. Therefore, the group has projected more responsiveness to the concerns of its neighbours, especially Beijing.

Ultimately, although the prospect of the Taliban attaining widespread international legitimacy appears remote in the near future, formal regional recognition remains within reach. To achieve that, the Taliban need to empower their more politicised leaders over the dogmatists, heed the expectations of the Afghan people and the broader global Muslim community, and genuinely address the strategic concerns of their neighbouring countries, particularly regarding security.

Otherwise, an entirely uncompromising political line risks perpetuating the Taliban's contentious position on the world stage. Their singular conviction of divinely ordained 'policies' translates to an unwillingness to negotiate. This, coupled with their conceptions of upholding 'doctrinal purity' and 'sovereign autonomy' results in an eschewal of political compromise and bargaining—hallmarks of peaceful international relations. Consequently, absent significant alterations beyond mere rhetoric, the long-term well-being of the Afghan people would likely be further imperilled.

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Declaration of Authorship

This thesis is entirely my own work and has been conducted in accordance with all applicable ethical and academic standards. I alone am responsible for the content and composition of this thesis. No unauthorised external assistance was utilised in its preparation, and all sources and aids employed are explicitly cited within the text. Passages directly quoted or those reflecting the ideas of others are clearly identified and attributed.

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