

# How to Engage Armed Groups? Reviewing Options and Strategies for Third Parties

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**Abstract:** Armed groups pose a severe challenge to current peace- and state-building processes. Their degree of dispersion, influence, and effect on local and international politics make it necessary to consider ways and strategies for coping and interacting with them. The article assesses and reviews the contribution of specific options, their suitability, and their applicability regarding particular types of actors. First, it delineates options for dealing with armed groups based on three perspectives: realist, institutionalist and constructivist. Second, the article matches these perspectives with the capabilities of international third parties. Finally, the paper reflects on the difficulties that arise from the plurality of different types of armed groups as well as external actors.

**Keywords:** Non-state armed groups, peace-building, state-building  
Nicht-staatliche bewaffnete Gruppen, Friedensaufbau, Staatsaufbau

## 1. Introduction: Non-State Armed Actors in Peace- and State-Building Processes

Armed groups of different kinds shape the situation during and after armed conflict in manifold ways. On the one hand they are responsible for violence against unarmed civilians in breach of international humanitarian law and for the establishment of criminal and informal economies typical of postwar societies. On the other hand armed groups are often the expression of political and social problems for they see themselves as representatives of distinct interests and may build on broader support within communities. Non-state armed actors, such as rebel organizations, clan militias, warlords, terrorists, and criminal networks, often bear the potential to disturb, undermine, or completely truncate processes of peace- and state-building, leading to violence flaring up again.

Generally, non-state armed actors can be defined as organized groups that are (i) willing and capable of using violence for pursuing their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions such as regular armies, presidential guards, police, and special forces. They, therefore, (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy concerning politics, military operations, resources and infrastructure. They may, however, be supported or instrumentalized by state actors, officially or unofficially. Moreover, there may be state officials or state agencies that are directly or indirectly involved in the activities of non-state armed actors – because of ideological reasons, political considerations, or personal interests (such as family or clan ties, clientelism and profit).

International peace- and state-building efforts threaten the position of most of these non-state armed actors in a conflict by aiming at strengthening or reconstructing state structures and institutions. Capable state structures on the whole limit non-state armed actors' room for maneuver and opportunities to pursue their political and / or economic agendas. Some

groups would face disarmament and, eventually, disbandment. Others would probably be forced to transform themselves and become political forces or integrate into official state structures, while criminal networks would simply risk their profits and face measures under law enforcement. In consequence, non-state armed actors are more likely to challenge than to support any steps that would strengthen or (re-)establish the state's monopoly on the use of force. In other words, non-state armed actors are part of the problem as much as they sometimes must be part of the solution. The dilemma reads as follows: Actors such as rebel movements, warlords or clan militias with the greatest potential for security governance are also the ones who have the greatest potential to spoil or undermine peace processes. Moreover, involving non-state armed actors and their (para-state) structures into state- and peace-building runs the risk of sending the wrong message ("violence pays") by devoting too much attention or by granting privileges to these groups who have benefited from war and the use of violence in the first place. This may not only increase demands by these actors but also seriously harm the credibility and legitimacy of third parties (the "moral hazard" problem). Finally, peace-building is hampered, if a group has been, or is, involved in gross human rights violations, if an actor becomes transnationalized, or if an actor is characterized by a loose network structure or by internal fragmentation where central decision-making can no longer be assured.

## 2. Options for Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors

There are no satisfying solutions to these issues. Considering past experience, context-specific, flexible arrangements in dealing with non-state armed actors will always be necessary. However, more broadly speaking, the international community in principle has a number of options at its disposal. One prominent attempt to systematize strategies for dealing with non-state armed actors is Stedman's contribution (1997), which distinguished three so-called spoiler management strategies: positive propositions or inducements, socialization, and arbitrary measures. A study conducted by the

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German Development Institute (Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, DIE) identified measures ranging from avoidance and disregard to apolitical action to cooperation as possible options for development agencies dealing with armed actors (see Grävingholt, Hofmann and Klingebiel 2007). Based on an empirical analysis, these approaches lack theoretical substantiation and do not cover the full range of options available.

The benefit of using International Relations theory in this context is that different strategic orientations in dealing with armed actors can be better structured and understood. Each of the approaches is linked to a particular paradigm that involves assumptions about the character of the conflict as well as the nature and the behavior of armed actors. First, realist approaches focus on the elimination and suppression of, and the control over, non-state armed actors to force them to adapt to a new situation; second, institutionalist approaches aim at changes of interests and policies; and third, constructivist approaches concentrate on a change in norms (such as nonviolence) and self-conception (identity). These approaches differ regarding strategies and instruments (key mechanisms) as well as regarding their anticipated results (type of behavioral change): The realist approach mainly rests on the application of force and the use of leverage. Under continuous pressure from the outside, non-state armed actors may change their policies, but inherent preferences usually remain unchanged – on the contrary, their positions may even harden. The institutional approach focuses on bargaining as its key mechanism, which may achieve sustainable results but rests on the respective actor's willingness to remain part of the bargaining process. Only the incessant application of an institutional setting offers enough incentives and guidance to first change policies and later possibly preferences. Constructivists rest their efforts on persuasion, which may not easily lead to results, but if a behavioral change occurs it will – in theory – be sustainable, as the motivation to maintain the changed behavior may over time be internalized by the actor (see table). The literature accounts for an array of approaches which may roughly be assigned to these different tendencies (see Schneckener 2009 and 2010; Newman and Richmond 2006; Ricigliano 2005).

Approach	Key mechanism	Behavioural change based on
Realist	Use of Force / Leverage (Counter-insurgency)	Adaptation
Institutionalist	Bargaining (Conflict Management)	Adaptation; Policy/Preference Change
Constructivist	Persuasion (Norm Diffusion)	Adaptation; Policy/Preference Change; Identity Change

**Table: Approaches for Dealing with Non-State Armed Actors**

## 2.1 Realist Approaches: The Use of Force and Leverage

The realist perspective emphasizes the role of power and countervailing power, and focuses on repressive means to put pressure on armed groups. The overall objective is to combat, eliminate, deter, contain, and marginalize armed actors.

(a) *Coercion*: Coercive measures comprise the use of force and coercive diplomacy. Typical instruments are military or police operations aimed at fighting or arresting members of armed actors, the deployment of international troops to stabilize a postwar situation, and the implementation of international sanctions (such as arms embargoes, no-fly zones, economic sanctions, freezing of foreign assets, travel sanctions, war crimes tribunals). The approach is often accompanied by law enforcement measures at national or international levels and threatens paramilitaries, rebel leaders, warlords, and clan chiefs in particular.

(b) *Control and containment*: This strategy aims at systematically controlling and containing the activities of armed actors and, thereby, reducing their freedom to maneuver and communicate. The aim is to maintain a certain status quo and to put these actors under strict surveillance (by using police and intelligence measures). This can be done in particular with actors who are concentrated in a certain territory that can be cut off (for example with fences or check points) from the rest of the country.

(c) *Marginalization and isolation*: This approach is concerned with reducing the political and ideological influence of armed actors by decreasing the impact of their world views and demands on public discourse and by isolating them – politically as well as physically – from their constituencies. For this scenario a broad consensus is needed among political elites and societal groups to not deal with these actors and not to react to their violent provocations. This approach is an option particularly for rather weak or already weakened actors such as smaller rebel groups or terrorists.

(d) *Enforcing splits and internal rivalry*: Another option aims at fragmenting and splitting armed actors between more moderate forces and hardliners. This can be achieved by different means, be it the threat of using force relentlessly, by offering secret deals to some fractions, and by involving key figures in a political process that increases their incentive to transform into a political movement. The strategy, however, can also result in the establishment of radical fringe and splinter groups that may be even more extreme. Such fragmentation processes can often be observed in rebel or terrorist groups.

(e) *Bribery and blackmail*: Members of non-state armed groups may be corrupted, forced or induced to cooperate, and silenced by offering material incentives, such as economic resources or well-paid posts. This may also involve attempts to blackmail or intimidate leaders (for instance through threatening family members). This strategy may be problematic politically and morally; however, in some cases it was indispensable for a peace process (see Afghanistan). Profit-driven actors, such as warlords and criminals, have often been receptive to such a strategy.

Most of these approaches involve a mixture of sticks and carrots, occasionally including deals with the entire group, the leadership or some key members to alter their behavior to conform at least in the short term. Therefore, in most instances these strategies are not used exclusively but in combination. For example, the concept of counterinsurgency combines some of these approaches to fight rebels and other insurgents as well as to undermine links between the armed actor and its supporters among the population (see Galula 2006; Kilkullen 2010; The US Army & Marine Corps 2007). The focus is directed at coercive measures backed by (material) incentives, reflecting an underlying (realist) assumption that most leaders of armed groups are not driven by ideals but rather by selfish interests. Therefore, these actors will comply if enough pressure is put on them or enough reward is offered.

## 2.2 Institutional Approaches: The Power of Bargaining

At the heart of institutional approaches are processes of bargaining aimed at the establishment of procedures, rules and institutional settings that acknowledge the preferences and interests of all conflict parties and allow for some kind of peaceful coexistence (conflict management). Examples are cease-fires, confidence-building measures, peace agreements as well as mechanisms for conflict settlement and arbitration. Mostly, these arrangements need to be implemented, guaranteed and controlled internationally. Two different approaches – which do not exclude each other – aim at achieving such arrangements:

(a) *Mediation and negotiation*: In this approach, external actors aim primarily at fostering a negotiation process among different parties, including non-state armed actors, to find a political settlement. As facilitators or mediators they urge armed actors to refrain from the use of force and to abandon maximalist political demands. For that purpose, informal contacts, multitrack diplomacy and extensive pre-negotiations are often necessary, in particular when direct contacts between the conflicting parties (for example a national government and a rebel group) are unlikely. Often arguing and bargaining methods need to be combined to achieve an outcome. These approaches imply a long-term engagement to provide for mediation and re-negotiation during the implementation of agreements. This scenario applies mainly to actors with a political agenda and a defined constituency (such as tribes, clans, ethnic groups and political parties). The most likely participants, therefore, are clan chiefs and rebel leaders; in some instances the political wing of terrorist groups or warlords may be involved, in particular if they seek to transform themselves into politicians.

(b) *Co-optation and integration*: The basic idea is that the leadership of armed actors can be co-opted and slowly integrated into a political setting, for example by distributing resources and sharing political responsibility. This approach implies a certain degree of informal or formalized power sharing, be it at national or local level, which would involve leaders of armed actors in day-to-day politics (see Hartzell and Hoddie 2007; O'Flynn and Russel 2005). In other words, the approach

attempts to give armed groups a role in governance that may change their attitudes and preferences. A good illustration is the attempt to gradually integrate Afghan warlords into the newly established political system, not least by offering them positions such as governors or ministers, but also by granting them a certain political status quo.

In contrast to the realist perspective, the starting point here is that many non-state armed actors are driven by grievances and political demands, which can be addressed through negotiations or other means. Even if the leadership is corrupt and greedy, in many instances, they must show some kind of political program or agenda to find followers and supporters in local communities, and therefore may be receptive to incentives and guarantees assured by institutional arrangements.

## 2.3 Constructivist Approaches: The Power of Persuasion

Constructivist approaches emphasize the central role of arguing and persuasion as well as processes of norm diffusion. Their ultimate aim is to persuade armed actors to accept, respect, and eventually internalize norms and, thereby, foster long-term transformation processes that not only involve conform behavior for tactical reasons but also a genuine and sustainable change of the actors' policies and self-conception (identity change).

(a) *Processes of socialization*: By involving armed actors into processes and institutions, this approach assumes that over time (potential) spoilers will be socialized into accepting certain norms and rules of the game (see in particular Hofmann 2006). Armed actors would undergo processes of collective learning, which would alter strategies and, eventually, their self-conception. This medium- to long-term strategy may work best for those armed actors with clear political ambitions who have to address long-term expectations of their constituencies and develop an interest in improving their local as well as international image.

(b) *Naming and shaming*: The attempt here is to organize social pressure and to campaign publicly, at the local, national and international level, against certain practices of non-state armed actors in order to harm their legitimacy. The aim is to persuade them to accept and respect certain agreements and norms, in particular norms of international humanitarian law, and to press them to refrain from certain violent methods (such as terrorist acts and the use land mines and child soldiers). Again, this approach may be useful if the actors involved depend on moral and material external support.

(c) *Reconciliation and transitional justice*: These processes are institutionalized and often preceded by an agreement that lays down the provisions and details of a process in which a recent, violent past will be addressed. Reconciliation processes stress empathy for victims, the confession of guilt, and public remorse, among other, while processes of transitional justice include the prosecution of war crimes and war criminals (see Bloomfield, Barns and Huyse 2003 and Buckley-Zistel 2008). Common tools are truth and reconciliation commissions and



criminal tribunals, which may be linked to amnesty provisions for leaders and members of armed actors if they contribute to an investigation of war crimes and human rights violations, regret their past actions credibly, and profess their wish to change their behavior. On the one hand, such amnesty provisions are highly contested because they may contradict the demands for justice by victims and, thus, endanger the reconciliation process. On the other hand, as part of an agreement, they may serve as an incentive to end violence and to refrain from using violence in the future.

The underlying assumption of constructivist approaches is that non-state armed actors can be affected by norms and arguments because many of them are concerned with their public image, moral authority (vis-à-vis their enemies), and sources of legitimacy. Indeed, a number of leaders in their public statements refer to general norms and try to argue their case from a normative perspective. Why not take them seriously and engage them in debates about norms and standards?

### 3. The Politics of Third Parties: Who is doing what?

Generally, the realist approach emphasizes the costs of an engagement with armed actors, focusing on how to diminish their influence and spoiling potential quickly and effectively, whereas the other two approaches – institutionalism and constructivism – are more concerned with a longer-term perspective that incorporates armed groups into the existing national or international systems. While each approach attempts to increase the cost of deviant behavior as well as the benefits of behavioral change for armed actors, they employ very different means and methods based on different actor capacities and capabilities to achieve this aim. For instance, state actors will more likely be able to use coercive measures or bribery and blackmail, while international organizations will be able to use their political leverage, and NGOs will focus on mechanisms that do not require massive resources and political authority. NGOs, however, may be able to pursue a longer-term approach of socialization, while international organizations and state actors often have to present results much faster to respond to political pressure. Accordingly, it is more obvious for external actors to prefer one approach over another depending on their objectives, resources and capacities. International organizations have the instruments of all three approaches at their disposal (realist, institutionalist, constructivist) – benefiting from their independent status as well as from the capacities of states as their primary members –, whereas states focus more on realist and institutionalist approaches. The capacities of NGOs are the most restricted in this context, disposing of constructivist approaches alone due to the nature of their organization and status.

### 3.1 International Organizations and Multilateral Forums

International organizations, such as the United Nations (including its special agencies), regional organizations (such as the European Union and the African Union), and multilateral forums (for instance the G8 or G20), dispose at least in theory of the most comprehensive range of options to handle (potential) spoilers in international politics. Regarding realist approaches, international organizations have the capability to build alliances and coalitions among its member states that allows them to take direct action or to physically intervene. They may do so by invoking resolutions that allow for the use of force or other coercive means (sanctions). At the same time, their actions and capabilities often depend on the political will and consent of their member states, particularly concerning the use of (military) force.

The institutionalist approach relies heavily on the standing that international organizations receive in international politics: They often assume the role of a negotiator or mediator in a multilevel environment, for example through UN and EU Special Representatives, Special Envoys or other specific arbitration mechanisms. In this role, they may call on all parties involved in a conflict or crisis, state actors as well as non-state armed actors, to commit to and enforce a peace process or a political settlement, as well as monitor such settlements. The purposeful distribution of incentives and disincentives also allows international organizations to exert leverage in negotiations with non-state armed actors, either by punishing them (for example through economic sanctions or naming and shaming), or by rewarding conform behavior and engagement in a peace process (for example by integrating armed actors into post-conflict governance through power-sharing agreements). International institutions, thus, offer a platform for rapprochement particularly between governments and armed opposition.

Regarding constructivist methods, international organizations have the capacity to influence international politics through the establishment of procedures, rules and institutional settings that serve two particular purposes: They promote new international norms among members, and guide their behavior. International organizations possess the capability to act as international norm entrepreneurs, promoting certain normative choices, and discouraging and potentially sanctioning others. When addressing non-state armed actors, constructivist methods make an effort to regulate their behavior in the same manner by setting guidelines and frameworks for appropriate behavior.

### 3.2 Governments and State Actors

State actors seem to be more likely to employ realist and institutionalist approaches when dealing with non-state armed actors in international politics. States often dispose of the required authority and resources to be able to conduct operations relying on force or the credible threat to use force against armed actors that aim at either disturbing the actions

of non-state armed actors or defeating them altogether. Governments usually have military and enforcement units at their disposal as well as multiple clandestine services, which open up an array of possible measures against non-state armed actors. Intervening governments may ascertain important information to leverage it against non-state armed actors. Noncompliance may lead to the enforcement of targeted sanctions through states as well as to targeted attacks on non-state actors. In extreme cases, intervening governments may decide to employ full military means, ranging from the enforcement of no-fly zones to a comprehensive military strike. The danger that arises is that non-state armed actors may be pushed further into spoiling and violent behavior, including violent retaliation that reinforces a circle of violence and leads to more extremism.

For this reason, state actors may also use their institutional status and channels to shape public discourse and to pressure other stakeholders involved. These channels comprise multilateral international organizations, such as the UN, the EU, and the AU, economic forums, as well as ad hoc alliances with other states and organizations, which open up a new range of possible courses of action, such as negotiations, mediation and facilitation by “honest brokers”. A coalition of states may act as a “Group of Friends” or “Contact Group”, engaging in conflict management and conflict mediation. States with a strategic interest in a particular conflict may take the lead in arguing and bargaining processes or they may apply coercive measures, such as favoring one party over the other, to increase the pressure on the other party. Donor conferences, as employed in Kosovo and Afghanistan, set additional incentives for conflict actors to change their behavior and comply with international demands. Moreover, institutional channels may be used to strengthen a military engagement: If negotiations fail, intervening governments can resort to force either through multilateral cooperation or through ad hoc military coalitions.

### 3.3 Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

International NGOs’ approaches towards non-state armed actors mainly rest on constructivist approaches, as NGOs usually lack the capacities to employ serious leverage and effective bargaining attempts. However, international NGOs are able to support mediation and negotiation processes with armed actors at high and medium levels – for example through the facilitation of talks, informal pre-negotiations, and the preparation of non-papers –, and in few cases even conduct mediations themselves. In these instances, they largely rely on arguing and persuasion to get the conflict parties to the table and, eventually, to an agreement.

Generally, NGOs have a strong capacity to influence public opinion (often with the use of the media), to educate and raise awareness about certain issues, to lobby political decision-makers, and to engage with diplomatically unacknowledged actors, such as non-state armed actors. NGOs benefit from their reputation as neutral and independent actors even if this perception is not necessarily shared by all. This puts them in a

fairly unique position to act as a facilitator for certain issues and to communicate with non-state armed actors independent of political circumstances. Moreover, they can focus on specific issues rather than on entire peace processes. For instance, NGOs such as Geneva Call and the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers approach non-state armed actors to provide an opportunity for them to adhere to international norms, in this case the ban on landmines and child soldiers. The arguments that NGOs employ strategically to persuade armed actors emphasize the benefits of adherence to specific norms and the costs of violations and violence. They comprise, among other, the improvement of armed groups’ (international) reputation, the better treatment of prisoners on the principle of reciprocity, the preservation of resources and military interests, for example through discipline and a functioning command structure, and the danger of prosecution by criminal tribunals or the International Criminal Court.

In their interaction with armed actors, international NGOs focus heavily on the transmission of information and knowledge, including technical knowledge, and aim at persuading armed actors with arguments that speak to their particular position in conflict (empathic approach). In other words, they explain to armed actors what they are supposed to do and why, and lay out concrete ways for the implementation of the norms in question. This flexible but principle-oriented approach is one of the NGOs’ strengths because it can be adjusted to the situation of the individual actor. The internalization of certain norms is not a precondition for further dialogue but is assumed to be the result of a long-term process (see Hofmann and Schneckener 2010).

The only leverage NGOs have in their engagement is their influence on public opinion, locally as well as internationally. They can create public pressure on noncompliant actors by employing naming and shaming techniques, although such techniques are not used very often due to their repercussions on the relationship between the NGO and the armed actor. To offer incentives and disincentives to armed actors, NGOs largely remain dependent on other actors, such as international organizations and states, to provide the required resources and political pressure.

### 4. Concluding remarks

Engagement with non-state armed actors is dependent on various factors. Armed groups display different appearances, aims, and motivations. They may seek to change the status quo or be an agency of the ruling party; they may seek dominance and use violence for different reasons; and they might be predominantly ideology-oriented or profit-driven or a combination thereof. Similarly, external actors display different means when engaging non-state armed actors. While states largely rely on realist and institutionalist approaches with force, leverage and bargaining as main mechanisms, international organizations revert to realist, institutionalist as well as constructivist approaches, using the institutional framework for medium-term and long-term strategies and falling back on their member states to carry out realist approaches. In

contrast, international NGOs apply constructivist approaches, building on their civil base and benefiting from an elaborate institutional network.

The resulting web of variables that describe an engagement with non-state armed actors suggests the following key problems: Internal armed conflicts or non-state conflicts usually involve more than one non-state armed actor. Multiple actors often exist in parallel to each other and are often treated differently by their local government – some are being utilized, some are supported, some are even deliberately set up by governments, while others, like rebels or warlords, are combated. Similarly, most conflicts involve a plurality of external actors, which apply, be it intended or unintended, different approaches. These approaches may, however, also exist in parallel; they follow different goals, prioritize different means and compete against each other. The problem is complicated by the fact that external actors do not exchange information about their own strategies vis-à-vis armed actors. Because of this, non-state armed actors are often able to play actors off against each other. Moreover, local actors are aware that time is usually on their side since external actors will not stay forever but need to leave the country because of limited resources and pressure from the public at home. Against this background, non-state armed actors may misuse offers by international organizations or NGOs to avoid or limit external pressure or external coercion. For example, they may accept the participation in a peace process led by an international organization to bypass legal prosecution or economic or military sanctions. Additionally, third parties often lack knowledge about the non-state armed actors they are dealing with and about the range of options they may have at their disposal. Governments tend to choose a certain approach they may have most experience with or are most capable of adopting. This often results in the expansion of military efforts beyond their original goals due to a previous failure to reach set goals (mission creep). At the same time, abandoning the mission in favor of official peace negotiations is often seen as giving in and rewarding non-state actors' use of violence. Here, international organizations or NGOs need to supplement government action. At the same time, international organizations often lack the political backing of the international community (despite resolutions at the UN) to take action.

To sum up, external actors dealing with non-state armed groups need to be aware of the existing range of approaches, actors, and their respective pros and cons. In a particular case, they need to know who can do what and when to develop a joint effort vis-à-vis armed actors. They also need to reflect the changing nature of armed actors in the aftermath of a conflict. This requires a much more nuanced understanding of the characteristics, dynamics and opportunities under which different armed actors act.

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