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The “Problems of Mobilization” and the Analysis of Armed Groups

ANTHONY VINCI

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“If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”

— Sun Tzu¹

The first step in knowing your enemy is deciding what to call him. When dealing with non-state, armed groups, there is a set list of categories which are used for classification. These categories include insurgent, guerilla, warlord, terrorist, and militia. From this initial classification we tend to apply a set of assumptions about the groups for our analysis and response. For instance, if we believe we are fighting a guerilla insurgency, we ask where the popular support is coming from; or if it is a terrorist group, we apply counter-terror tactics.

The danger in this approach is that poor classification and analysis may lead to an improper response. At best, this may be ineffective; at worst, it can be catastrophic. For instance, the Ugandan government began by treating the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) as a guerilla insurgency, and this led to standard strategies such as creating protected hamlets in order to distance the group from local support. However, the LRA had never had much local support, nor did it really need it. Thus, the protected hamlet strategy has not reduced the LRA’s ability to continue the conflict and has served only to further alienate the affected population from the Ugandan government. If the LRA was better classified and analyzed, the Ugandan army’s response might have been more effective.

The fundamental problem is that armed groups cannot always be clearly defined. This issue has arisen with the multiplication and diversifica-

tion of armed groups since the end of the Cold War. Insurgents beholden to the Soviets have been forced to find new and creative ways to support and arm themselves. Once-forgotten motivations, such as religion and ethnicity, have come to play a greater role in post-Cold War conflicts. Protracted wars in the developing world have led armed groups to adapt and evolve over time. Globalization has opened up many new doorways for armed groups to arm and fund themselves. These factors have radically changed the nature of armed groups and allowed them to adapt and evolve into completely new forms. While it once might have been relatively straightforward to distinguish an insurgency from a terrorist group, or even a domestic terrorist from an international one, now it is not so simple.

The fact is, our current tool box of classification and analysis is not necessarily ready to deal with the diverse and rapidly evolving types of armed groups, and this is cause for concern. Of course, there always will be lessons to learn from past instances of insurgencies or terrorism. But in order to be agile and responsive enough to deal with armed groups such as those operating in Iraq—which we cannot conclusively classify as insurgents or terrorists—we need to reconsider the entire approach to analysis and response.

This article attempts to lay the foundation for a more agile, rationalized system of analysis for all types of armed groups which can take into account the evolving and adapting nature of contemporary armed groups. In particular, it will supply a tool kit for analyzing different armed groups with two intentions: to provide a better system of comparison between armed groups, and a more effective perspective for recommending tactical and strategic responses. Rather than adding another taxonomic system to the already extensive literature, this article seeks to change the perspective used to analyze armed groups.

In order to accomplish this task, the article will seek to find the lowest common denominator by which to compare all armed groups. It asks the question, What are the issues which all armed groups must address regardless of their history, motivations, or goals? Put another way, What are the problems which any armed group must face in order to mobilize its forces? By analyzing the ways that different armed groups solve these problems, we can find out a lot about even hard-to-classify armed groups and address our own tactical and strategic responses to these groups in a more nuanced fashion.

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The article will begin by illustrating what these “problems of mobilization” are. It will then examine the range of possible ways to solve these problems. The tool’s usefulness for both analysis and response will then be examined.

The Problems of Mobilization

In order to mobilize a fighting force, an armed group must meet three basic requirements. It needs people who will fight. It needs the means of force, including weapons and the basics of survival. Finally, it needs the ability to exercise direction. While there are other possible issues to address, such as a defensive base or intelligence capability, these issues are not necessary in the same way that the main three requirements are. For example, armed groups like terrorists can mobilize without having a base camp, while warlords regularly function with little to no intelligence capability. However, we could not even imagine an armed group which did not have people, weapons, and the ability to direct its fighters. All of these requirements entail solving some difficult problems. We can refer to these as the problems of mobilization.

Most important, an armed group must be able to motivate personnel to fight for it and thus must answer the potential recruit’s question, “Why should I fight and possibly die for you?” This is the problem of motivation. As Paul Collier points out, there are certain dilemmas wrapped up in convincing people to fight.² First, there is the *collective action problem*, in which it is a “public good” to fight but there will be free riders who want the benefit but do not have an incentive to help personally. Second, there is a *coordination problem*, in that people might join a large force, but are not apt to join a small one because they may feel it would not be able to accomplish the objectives. Finally, there is a *time-consistency problem*, in which soldiers have to fight before they achieve their objective (or attain benefits). This means that while it is easy for the leader to promise benefits, individuals recognize that he may not be trustworthy and that promises may not be made good after victory. These three problems are compounded in a dynamic environment like, for instance, Somalia, where it is difficult to predict the future.

A more straightforward problem is how to obtain and move equipment, the problem of logistics. The equipment necessary to mount an insurgency depends on the particularities of the conflict and the environment in which it is taking place. But, whatever the case, weapons of some type and basic survival goods are needed. For example, the LRA has simple needs: machetes and Kalashnikovs are suitable weapons, and the essentials of survival are truly basic, some millet and secondhand clothes. On the other hand, the Afghan mujahideen needed Stinger missiles carried long distances on donkeys to effectively combat the Russians.

Finally, an armed group must have a method of directing its forces. For this the group must have leadership ability, including a set of tactics and strategies. It must also address the question of how to communicate its commands and get its members to obey commands. These are the problems of command, control, and communication (C3).

These several aspects, then, are the minimum problems that must be overcome by any armed group, in any environment. The problems are influenced by multiple contingent factors. In particular, the social and cultural features of the population concerned will affect motivation and command. The presence of natural resources and other environmental or geographic factors, such as distance to the nearest neighboring state, will contribute to the determination of logistical factors and communication. The internal and external political and economic climate will affect personnel issues, like motivation and command, as well as logistical arrangements, including the relative availability of technology. Yet, even within these highly variable contextual factors, there is still only a set number of ways to solve the three problems of mobilization—motivation; logistics; and command, control, and communication.

Solutions to the Problem of Motivation

Broadly speaking, people can be motivated to fight in four ways. They can fight out of a sense of loyalty, they may feel that fighting is mutually beneficial for survival, there may be economic incentives, and, finally, they may simply be forced to fight.

Loyalty

Loyalty may arise from several sources. One important origin is being a member of a definable community, such as an ethnicity, tribe, nation, or religion. Related to this, a group may form out of a belief in a particular idea, such as the need for revolution. Finally, individuals may be convinced by the personal charisma of an individual.

Individuals derive both instrumental and existential benefit from membership in a community and this will give an individual a reason to per-

petuate the group and, therefore, the inclination to fight for it. Instrumentally, there is advantage from an association with others that may potentially bring economic or other benefits. Especially attractive in conflict environments are the potential strategic and defensive gains. Existentially, individuals can benefit from participatory membership in a group, ranging from a sense of belonging to a higher purpose for their actions. In general, individual rewards do not need to be immediate and can be promised for future collection. Men will fight in order to attain or retain these benefits.

Loyalty generates trust, or “social capital,” between the individual and the group (and its leaders), which gives the individual a reason to feel that fighting today may lead to benefit tomorrow. This allows leaders to effectively promise future benefit. Related to this, by participating in groups, “people learn to set each decision in the context of past and future decisions about other matters: I’d better not free-ride now because other people didn’t free-ride last time, and if I do, they might free-ride next time.”³ The group itself will reinforce these perpetuating activities through social pressure on members to conform.

One of the most powerful forms of loyalty is “primary group loyalty,” a phenomenon which seems to be the core motivation for individuals to continue fighting in wartime situations. In the seminal studies *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*, by S. L. A. Marshall, and *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, by Samuel Stouffer, the authors found that US soldiers were most driven to continue fighting by loyalty to their immediate units.⁴ These findings were recently reaffirmed in a US Army War College study on Iraq.⁵ There is no reason to think that such motivations do not also hold to some extent for armed groups as well.

Self-help

As loyalty pulls people into a group, the “security dilemma” pushes them together. In some states the government’s authority over society has collapsed completely, and in these collapsed states, the nature of security changes radically.⁶ Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis describe the security situation in a collapsed state as replicating the “pattern of Hobbesian competition for security in the ‘state of nature,’ where no sovereign power protects fearful individuals from each other.”⁷ In such a situation a security dilemma develops in which “each party’s efforts to increase its own security reduce the security of others.”⁸ Within this environment, an actor must rely on self-help—i.e., he must provide for his own protection.

Continuing the parallel initiated by Snyder and Jervis, just as the security dilemma drives individuals to fight with others out of a sense of mutual threat, it also does the reverse, causing them to align with each other for de-

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fense. This may be seen as resembling the classic balance of power, in which weaker actors align against more powerful actors. Therefore, while an individual may not feel loyalty to a particular group, he will join them if he feels it to be the best way to survive. The same goes for group-to-group alliances which, in conflict environments, use the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Thus, while the security dilemma may help to explain why ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia armed against each other, it also helps to explain why these same groups consolidated themselves.

Economic Incentive

Recent conflict analysis literature has focused extensively on the economic incentives of conflict and demonstrates how economic incentives motivate fighters. Authors such as David Keen and Paul Collier have analyzed the role that economics have played in conflicts throughout Africa.⁹ The essential point is that economic incentives provide an immediate, rather than promised, benefit to fighters, allowing for a “bottom-up” motivation to fight.

Immediate economic gain eliminates the free-rider problem, because only those who participate will benefit. It also removes the problem of coordination, for even on a small scale there is still benefit to be had, and it removes the problem of time-consistency because there is the potential for immediate benefit. For example, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) had few if any ideological benefits, but it could pay its fighters well in loot.

Coercion

Finally, individuals may be coerced into fighting. The most basic method is to apply a physical threat. Throughout history, this has ranged from enslavement to conscription.

Somewhat more sophisticated means of coercion rely on psychological manipulation. For example, the LRA abducts child soldiers and then uses a systematic process of traumatization to psychologically manipulate them into fighting.¹⁰ More commonly, various social and peer pressures may be used to recruit fighters. Rather than solving the problem of motivation, coercion circumvents it.

Solutions to Logistical Problems

There are four basic methods used by armed groups to obtain weapons and equipment. They can manufacture (or grow) it, steal what they need, buy it from other groups, or be given it. Each approach has both advantages and disadvantages.

Self-supply

A straightforward way to attain weapons and survival goods is to make them. Historically, groups would farm or collect food and manufacture their own weapons. The primary benefit of this is that a group can be completely self-sufficient.

While farming and collecting food is possible, it is not necessarily an efficient use of resources since it is not the core competency of armed groups. Some armed groups do make their own explosive devices, such as Hamas, the IRA, and the Iraqi insurgency. But in general it is difficult for many nation-states, much less armed groups, to manufacture their own modern weapons.

Looting

The easiest way for an armed group to obtain the weapons it needs is to steal them. When a state collapses, weaponry is often easy to obtain through looting. However, obtaining weapons from an active army may be difficult since it involves “picking oneself up by the bootstraps,” in that it is usually necessary to have some weaponry in order to raid other groups for theirs.

Obtaining food and water by looting is a relatively simple process, as most farmers are usually unarmed. Yet simply taking food is not always the most efficient method to procure it. Rather, as Mancur Olson notes, it may be preferable to “regularize” theft.¹¹ If a bandit takes his theft in a more regularized form—i.e. taxes—and maintains a monopoly of theft in the area, those who inhabit the area will have an incentive to produce. The income generated by the inhabitants will lead to larger gains by the “stationary bandit” over time. Therefore, it is in his interest to leave some income to the inhabitants while also protecting them from “roving bandits.” This approach is often taken by long-term insurgencies such as the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) or the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

Purchasing

Another way to gain necessary resources is to simply buy them. The effects of globalization have been particularly good to insurgencies as they have made many goods, especially weapons, easily available, even in the most remote parts of the world.¹² However, a reliance on purchasing weapons demands that the armed group has an economic system.

As the recent war economy literature has noted, this is not out of the question for armed groups. In particular, they have often come to rely on the extraction of natural resources, such as diamonds or timber, to exchange for goods in the global marketplace. This is how, for instance, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone armed itself.

External Source

Lastly, armed groups may be given the equipment they need by external sources. Generally this is done for strategic reasons. Throughout the Cold War, one or the other superpower often funded insurgencies in states which were clients of the other superpower. For example, the United States helped fund the mujahideen in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviets.

Such external support still occurs. For instance, the Ugandan government funded the activities of the SPLA in order for them to fight against its rival, Sudan. In retaliation, the Sudanese government funded the LRA against the Ugandan government.¹³ And, of course, armed groups can rely on being given resources by local residents or diaspora who support the cause. However, relying on external resources limits the independence of armed groups, as they must meet the demands of the supplier.

Solutions to Problems of Command, Control, and Communication

A system of command, control, and communication is necessary in order for an armed group to direct its forces. The groups must have leadership, a hierarchical control structure, a set of tactics and strategies to carry out, and a way of effectively communicating between fighters and the leadership. The solutions to these problems are usually very specific and differ in degree, though we can generalize about them somewhat.

An armed group must have a leadership cadre with the ability to direct its members. This usually involves a single leader or a small group which is invested with authority, if only to make strategic decisions. For instance, even al Qaeda, which is an extremely decentralized organization, still has a central leadership that makes the high-level decisions, such as defining the enemy and rules of combat. Below this top leadership there is generally a hierarchical chain of command to some degree.

As with political organizations, an armed group's leadership can rely on authority from charismatic, patrimonial, or bureaucratic sources.¹⁴ Charismatic power originates in an individual. Alternatively, patrimonial power derives from direct exchange from the top of an organization down the hierarchy. Finally, bureaucratic power is instilled in the organization itself. All three forms of authority can be used by armed groups, and usually there

is some mixture. For instance, charismatic authority has been used by the many “heroes” of insurgency, like Che Guevara. Related to this, religious authority may be used, as al Qaeda and other fundamentalist terrorist groups have found. Patrimonial power is probably the most common form of authority for armed groups and is usually based on monetary exchange, such as the looting-based payment system of the RUF. Long-term, well-developed insurgencies, like the SPLA or the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), tend to develop some form of bureaucratic power.

In order to assure command, an organization must have some level of hierarchical organization and discipline. Discipline and structure in armed groups can range from quite low, little more than that in a mob, up to highly trained and dedicated troops who function together in a complex structure. Often, armed groups borrow from conventional militaries. Borrowed organizational structures and discipline techniques can include ranking systems, the use of drill, and uniforms for combatants.

Armed groups also need communication both up and down the hierarchy, in order to have orders effectively carried out and to bring intelligence from the ground back up to the leadership. Communication relies on technology or social organization of various sorts. For instance, the LRA relies on cell phones to communicate between units and bases in Sudan as well as a hierarchical chain of communication between foot soldiers and top generals.

With the ability to direct troops in place, an armed group must then develop a strategy and set of tactics which determine, both literally and figuratively, what direction to go in. The strategies of armed groups can be borrowed, such as from Che Guevara or the military doctrine of a state’s army, or made up by the armed group itself, as the “Holy Spirit Tactics” of Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Movement.¹⁵ In some cases, armed groups seem to fight with essentially no strategy and few tactics other than random shooting, as is often said about the armed groups of the Liberian and Ugandan conflicts. However, even in these instances, there is in fact a rational set of tactics and strategies, as detailed in the work of David Keen and Alex De Waal.¹⁶

Centralized vs. Decentralized

The organizational structure of an armed group can usually be broadly divided into centralized and decentralized strategies. Armed groups practicing centralized strategies attempt to control their members through a tight network of hierarchical command. This necessarily involves a higher degree of discipline in order to ensure that there is organization within the chain of command. It also demands a higher level of technological sophistication, such as satellite phones or the internet, in order to connect different levels of command that may be geographically remote. Many longer-term insurgencies fighting

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against a conventional military force use a centralized strategy. For example, the SPLM/A, which uses both a conventional military chain of command and satellite phones, employs a centralized strategy.

A decentralized strategy is less dependent on discipline and technology, and it allows for more independence in the ranks. The non-hierarchical (or less hierarchical) organization of the group means that lower-level commanders can have more independent control. The trade-off is that there is a greater danger of factionalization, as semi-independent commanders split from the main force, or even a complete breakdown in command. One solution to this problem is a bottom-up ideology of control in which soldiers are inculcated with a set of beliefs that reflect those of the command; therefore, when command is relinquished, they can be trusted to continue the strategy. Most terrorist organizations use some degree of a decentralized (or “cellular”) structure. Another method of ensuring control is to predict the probable motivations and actions of groups and arm them accordingly, as is used by the Sudanese government with the Janjweed fighters.¹⁷

Analysis and Response

The primary value of identifying the problems of mobilization is to provide an analytical tool which one can use to identify, understand, and address new or quickly changing organizations. The analysis does not have to allude to the motivations or goals of a particular armed group. Nor must it rely on apparent similarities in tactics or the self-labeling of the organization. Analysis based on such factors is often less effective because apparently similar goals, tactics, and strategies can differ radically between seemingly like groups and can change over time within a particular group.

Rather than simply classifying an armed group as a terrorist group, insurgency, or any other standardized category, this analytical framework allow us to ask questions about how the group functions—i.e., how it solves its problems of mobilization. Though the solutions may change over time, and thereby change our comparison, the nature of the change is directly relevant to the nature of our analysis and response. In this way we can distinguish seemingly similar groups which have differences relevant for tactics and

strategy or apply lessons learned from seemingly unlike groups. Not only can this clear up potential doctrinal issues but it also has direct effects in the field.

For instance, the various armed groups in Somalia are often classified under the heading of militias or warlords. However, using the problems of mobilization we are able to see and make specific distinctions between these groups. Some groups are an extension of a larger, civilian political organization. This becomes clear when we note that the motivation system behind these militias is based on clan loyalty. These militias include the various factions which have formed to represent clans, such as the Somali National Front (SNF). Other armed groups in Somalia base their solution to the problem of motivation on economic incentives because they cannot rely on clan loyalty to motivate their fighters. Warlords, such as Mohammed Quanyare, must therefore set up entire resource exploitation systems in order to provide these economic incentives.

We also can make relevant distinctions within a particular set of armed groups which have similar solutions to one problem, but not to others. For instance, there may be a set of Somali armed groups which use clan loyalty to motivate troops. We might want to refer to these as militias. However, some of these militias may rely on external supporters, like the Ethiopian government, while others may exploit local farmers to purchase weapons on the open market. Such differences are highly relevant, but are lost by simply calling each group a militia.

This is not to say that we necessarily must drop our traditional categories. We can still classify a group in one of the traditional categories, such as warlord or militia, if we like. The problems-of-mobilization analysis will in fact make such classification easier in that we can form more rigorous classification tests. For instance, we can label a Somali armed group whose motivational system is based on economic incentive and whose logistical system is based on natural resource exploitation as a warlord. We can then make comparisons with another group, such as Charles Taylor's NPFL, which has similar motivational and logistical solutions, and use the lessons learned from combating that group. The point is that the classification should be based on the functional analysis, not the other way around.

The implications for tactical and strategic responses from this more refined analysis can be quite profound. Using an analysis based on the problems of mobilization, tactics and strategies can be tailor-made for new armed groups at a moment's notice by combining the knowledge of, and possible responses to, specific facets of an armed group's solutions. For instance, a new armed group may look like a guerilla insurgency in its tactics, but have no popular support. Instead, this group may rely on looting to pay its fighters. Rather than sticking with the strategies for dealing with a guerilla insurgency,

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it is better to use those strategies which counter guerilla command structures combined with those for dealing with looting-based motivational systems. Thus, for instance, we might use standard counterinsurgency tactics in direct, physical confrontation with the group along with the response strategies learned in dealing with Somali warlords, such as the need to deny warlords the ability to loot humanitarian aid, to combat its logistics system.¹⁸

Also, and most importantly, this analytical approach can be predictive and preemptive. The problems of mobilization are a finite set of problems with a finite set of solutions. An armed group's solutions to the problems of mobilization point to its weaknesses. Since these problems must continually be solved, knocking out one of the group's solutions will force the group to find another solution or perish. Any armed group will have to solve the same problems, and if it cannot turn to one set of solutions, it will have to turn to another. Through a process of elimination it may be possible to predict where an armed group will turn in order to solve a problem when an old solution is no longer valid. With this in mind it may be possible to “head them off at the pass,” and close down their possible solutions before they get to them.

An example of the usefulness of this framework is provided by the LRA's conflict in northern Uganda and southern Sudan. The motivations for the LRA's activities are notoriously difficult to discern, as are its ultimate goals.¹⁹ At times the LRA seems to act as a typical rebel insurgency, targeting a government with which it disagrees. At other times its leader, Joseph Kony, seems to be completely insane and obsessed with nothing more than the torture of members of his own ethnic group, the Acholi people.

However, even if we cannot classify the LRA into one of the usual categories such as warlord or insurgent, we can still come to understand a significant amount about it. For example, we can safely assume that Kony needs to obtain weapons and equipment. For some time these weapons came from raids, but in the mid-1990s the Sudanese government began funding the LRA. They provided the organization with weapons and equipment which were, at times, reported to be of better quality than the Ugandan army's equipment.

Over the last few years, however, the Sudanese government has ended its funding of the LRA.

This has left the LRA with the same problem in need of a new solution. Our analysis must now attempt to pin down exactly how the LRA will continue to meet its logistical requirements. The potential solutions include self-supply, looting, purchasing, or finding another external supplier. The next step in the analysis would be to question which of these are likely. For instance, since the LRA does not control any natural resources, it probably does not have the funds to purchase weapons on its own. From here, we would continue to narrow the options, and then preempt those which seem most likely.

Conclusions

This approach of focusing on the problems of mobilization is not just useful as a framework for analysis. More important, it provides a wholly different perspective for understanding and responding to armed groups. The usual method for responding to an armed group is to classify it as an already defined type and then to use the existing analytical literature to find methods for responding to the group. Instead, the problems-of-mobilization perspective begins by asking how the group solves the same problems as other groups. Responses can then be suggested based on similar solutions to specific problems. This perspective may help even the odds between agile armed groups and slower-to-adapt conventional militaries.

Armed groups have an advantage over conventional forces. The relative simplicity of their organizational structures allows them to evolve and adapt to situations extremely quickly. This goes beyond the simple negative feedback of tactics races. They can find whole new motivational systems; for instance, the LRA went from voluntary enlistment to coerced conscription almost overnight. Furthermore, these groups may take advantage of standard, expected tactics and strategies used by their conventional foes and preempt responses to them with structural changes.

The perspective yielded by a problems-of-mobilization analysis permits a more refined approach to fighting and otherwise responding to armed groups, which may give a conventional military a significant advantage. A conventional military loses out in the battle of effectiveness when it gets stuck in doctrine battles over the best way to confront an “insurgency” or “terrorist group.” When it does put together this doctrine, it can even end up worse off because the static doctrine is unable to keep up with changes in the enemy’s organization. In the current global security environment, there are many different possible armed groups that are being fought simultaneously and over such a long period that the armed groups can evolve while the con-

flict continues. By thinking in terms of functions and solutions to be met and combated, a conventional military can put together a tool kit of ways to confront various different possible armed group solutions. These responses can then be tailored to the armed group it is fighting, or even preemptively used to target what the armed group may become in the future. In this way, a conventional military such as that of the United States may be able to become as agile and responsive as tiny armed groups and thereby win any potential confrontation in the most efficient and effective way possible.

NOTES

The author would like to thank Professor Christopher Coker for his advice and insight on this paper.

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