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# Non-State Armed Actors, New Imagined Communities, and Shifting Patterns of Sovereignty and Insecurity in the Modern World

DIANE E. DAVIS

## Introduction: Rethinking Assumptions about Non-State Armed Actors

In a world of growing security challenges where random and targeted violence generate public anxiety and government concern, non-state armed actors have captured significant scholarly attention, particularly in failed or fragile states where institutions of governance and overall state legitimacy are weakened or under siege.<sup>1</sup> The challenges posed by non-state armed actors are seen as particularly de-stabilizing in low-income late developers where extreme poverty has intersected with political dissatisfaction, authoritarian practices, and ethno-national exclusion to drive violent attacks on states and governing regimes both within home territories and abroad.<sup>2</sup> In both contexts, whether it is the economy or the state that is considered weak, non-state armed actors are identified as central protagonists of regime instability, political disorder, violent conflict, and overall conditions of insecurity and violence.

The assumed relationship between poverty, weak or unstable states and the proliferation of non-state armed actors has translated into a set of geopolitical, developmental, and even disciplinary biases in the literature. Those most likely to undertake research on non-state armed actors are either political scientists with an interest in terrorism, national security, domestic rebellion, and state power,<sup>3</sup> or human rights lawyers and theoreticians who face the thorny challenge of articulating and insuring rights-based codes of conduct and behavioural expectations among armed political groups who challenge the legitimacy and legislative reach of nation-states.<sup>4</sup> In their studies, both groups focus most attention on the poorest and most politically unstable regions of Africa, South or Central Asia, and the Middle East, where poverty, state weakness, military or autocratic rule, and rebel opposition to authoritarian states are widespread. Finally, solutions centre around remedying the political and economic conditions most correlated with state fragility, violent opposition, civil war, and/or the human rights abuses and high levels of impunity associated with these activities. The most popular range from the establishment of good governance and poverty alleviation programs to the deployment of human rights advocates or international peacekeeping forces (or some other form of effective mechanism to produce a cessation of violence) to the diplomatic or military strengthening of regimes in power so that sovereignty or government authority is no longer in question.

But non-state armed actors who fuel insecurity and engage in violence are by no means a problem only in the poorest or most politically unstable (and least

democratic) countries of the world; nor are terrorists, revolutionaries, guerrilla rebels or other politically self-defined actors seeking to undermine or overthrow states and regimes the only non-state armed actors of relevance. Armed actors not formally employed by the state contribute to insecurity and endemic violence in a variety of regime-types around the world, some more stable and democratic than others, and some with considerable evidence of economic development and wealth. Moreover, many non-state actors are motivated neither by anti-government ideals nor by regime change, nor are their targets or 'arenas' of action always directed at the level of the national state.

Among non-state armed actors who proliferate in the contemporary period, a large and growing number focus their attention on urban economies<sup>5</sup> and transnational networks of trade and accumulation,<sup>6</sup> with some of them even structured around clandestine networks of remittances,<sup>7</sup> thereby flying under the radar screen (if not catapulting over) the broadly cast domains of governance and sovereignty associated with the nation-state. Likewise, a considerable number of these non-state armed actors use violence to secure markets, networks, and the supply of goods or activities for economic survival, suggesting that their targets are as likely to be other market or supply chain competitors (and sometimes even other actors in civil society, including other non-state armed actors) as the sovereign state itself.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of these non-state armed actors include armed drug lords in urban Brazil and Mexico, international smuggling rings in Central and Southeast Asia, new mafia organizations in Russia, community-based vigilantes in South Africa, Guatemala, and Indonesia, and most striking perhaps, an astounding number of armed private security forces or citizen militias taking on policing functions in politically stable and unstable countries alike, ranging from Mexico to Pakistan to Iraq. All these activities rely on armed actors who fuel violence and generate conditions akin to warfare, but without identifying the state or political upheaval as their main objective.

The range of activities in which today's armed actors engage raises important questions about the rather simplistic 'greed versus grievance' dichotomy that has dominated the literature on non-state armed actors, suggesting not only that grievance is hardly a universal motivation behind the mobilization of non-state armed actors, but also that the concept of greed may be just as misguided. 'Greed' may capture the motivations behind the drug trade, because of the enormous sums of money involved. But as a notion it makes much less sense when the non-state armed actor is involved in smuggling low-rent contraband (e.g. CDs, designer knock-offs, etc.) or when community justice – as in vigilantism or even citizen militias – is the underlying aim.

Further complicating conventional wisdom on the subject, preliminary evidence suggests that some of the above-mentioned categories of non-state armed actors have been known to act clandestinely *on behalf of* states – or in conjunction with the state's own armed actors, sometimes as formal or informal contract employees – as much as against the regime in power. Examples not only include the government's deployment of paid mercenaries to fill gaps where official military operations have failed, but also the use of citizen militias, privately contracted paramilitaries, neighbourhood 'posses', and other civil society-based associations or independent providers

of security to achieve the policing or military aims necessary for establishing the state's hegemony.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most complicated of such arrangements is that currently seen in Iraq, where the so-called 'Awakening' militias can be considered both a social movement and an enforcer group working both for citizens and the state, albeit indirectly and with the formal identity as a non-state armed actor.<sup>10</sup>

Lest one think that such instances are epiphenomenal, or tied specifically to the current conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, evidence suggests that these types of coercive actors, straddling both the state and civil society, are far more common than has been generally recognized in the contemporary literature on non-state actors, let alone in the literature on violence and insecurity. Recent research by Desmond Arias show that armed groups in Brazil interact directly with the state in 'social networks', providing financial or narcotic kick-backs to security forces, who in turn provide armed groups with weaponry and a modicum of unconstrained manoeuvrability in their respective communities;<sup>11</sup> while Ralph Rozema has identified a version of such collaborations in his study of the relations between criminal networks and paramilitaries in Colombia.<sup>12</sup> Historical evidence further shows that the state-sanctioned deployment of citizen militias or privately operated paramilitary forces has been a common response to political instability and/or industrial, agrarian, and communal violence in cases as diverse as 19th-century Greece, 20th-century Mexico and Peru, and contemporary Colombia.<sup>13</sup> The current United States government's reliance on paid mercenaries and other contract employees to achieve its military aims in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the general use of paid mercenaries by militaries around the world, suggests that the practice continues in new forms and should not be relegated to the past.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the accelerating growth of private security forces on a world-wide scale may be the most important challenge to conventional thinking on non-state armed actors, in theoretical if not empirical terms, because it signals the widespread transfer of security functions from the state to civil society.<sup>15</sup> The fact that private police are evident in rich and poor countries alike, democratic and otherwise, further suggests that this shift may be as much about contemporary times and reflective of larger patterns of security re-organization seen in the widespread transfer of policing functions from the public to the private sphere, as it is about poverty, state fragility, and democratic institutions and practices (or their lack thereof). To the extent that private police exist alongside public police, rather than in replacement of them, also means that this phenomenon blurs the line between a state and non-state monopoly of the means of violence, thereby challenging the categorical imperative underlying longstanding use.

With all these shifts, many of the concepts and assumptions used to study both social and political change, not to mention coercion, non-state armed action, or the state itself, are turned on their heads – especially in the context of political conflict, the arena that has hosted most of the literature on non-state armed actors. To the extent that security and policing functions are undertaken by individual citizens, clans, and other community or identity-based groups, they move to the larger analytical domain of civil society but undertake actions with a private rather than public purpose, sometimes even engaging in 'uncivil' activities while at other times

providing key public goods. Complicating the analytical terrain, because in conflict situations civil society is frequently the source of rebellion and opposition to predatory or authoritarian rule, it is often viewed as enabling those in the public sphere to struggle against the 'lifeworld colonizing' forces of an unjust state (to use Habermas' notion). But armed actors who answer to private contractors can never serve the entire public. Likewise, to the extent that the state loses its monopoly on coercion, whether to privately contracted police or armed mafia, it can no longer guarantee a critical public good, security; still, precisely because in conflict situations it is common for the state to use its armed forces to protect private interests (i.e. those loyalists embedded in the regime or on the receiving end of political or economic largesse) rather than all citizens, whether this truly means the loss of public goods is not entirely clear.

Given the complexity of this picture, it may be time to re-think prevailing assumptions about non-state armed actors and consider a new analytical agenda for studying who they are and what their impact is on security and violence in the contemporary era. We must be prepared to question our definition of what, exactly, constitutes a non-state armed actor and whether such actors, despite the nomenclature, might also systematically maintain some clandestine or informal relationship to the state, even in the absence of formal linkages. How hard and fast is the analytical distinction between state and non-state armed actors; and what is the theoretical rationale for preserving it in future scholarship? Why do we distinguish between political versus economic motivations in our categorization of non-state armed actors? Are clans, tribes, warlords, and rebels all that different from mafias, gangs, and drug lords; in what ways and why? Further, we must be prepared to examine and perhaps move beyond conventional understandings of the conditions under which non-state armed actors will emerge, thrive, employ violence, and thus contribute to conditions of insecurity. In today's world, the functions and territorial reach of nation-states are in flux; progress on democratic transition has itself generated a proliferation of non-state armed state actors; new global economic practices and international networks link non-state actors with varying economic or political agendas to each other in commodity or supply chains that know no territorial bounds; and insecurity abounds, even for the wealthiest, but more tragically so for the poor.<sup>16</sup> Given these changes, are the assumptions about states and their arms-wielding opponents – drawn from cold war and post-cold war frameworks about the legitimacy and hegemony of the nation-state – still robust enough to lead us to a good understanding of contemporary security challenges?

In this essay, I try to answer these questions by arguing that the emergence and proliferation of non-state armed action focuses as much on economic as political claims, and that the forms and spatial patterns of violence and insecurity these actors generate can be considered both product and producer of the changing nature of states and sovereignty in the contemporary era. This larger claim is structured around several specific propositions linked by a single narrative linking discrete sections of this essay. After accounting for the recent appearance of a much wider range of non-state armed actors whose objectives depart significantly from the armed rebels and anti-state movements that preoccupied contemporary security

studies writings on non-state armed actors in prior decades, I turn to the contemporary global dynamics that drive this phenomenon. After tracing the source and nature of these activities to emergent transnational dynamics and new territorial locations on both local and global scales, I then argue that the new 'spatiality' of non-armed state action forms the basis for new imagined communities of allegiance and new forms and scales of sovereignty, each of which challenge the power and legitimacy of the traditional nation-state. To explain why this has occurred, I examine historical trajectories of political and economic development over the past two decades and how they undermined old notions of sovereignty and political allegiance while creating new ones. Finally, I assess the implications of these developments for contemporary security challenges.

The bulk of evidence in this essay is drawn from middle-income late developers, mainly in Latin America, but with some additional reference to South Africa and other countries of the global south where the developmental state has made some progress. These countries serve as the main focus not just because this is where we see a rise in non-state armed action structured around economic activities, but also because the democratic character, relative political stability, and modest but clear economic progress in these countries makes the emergence of non-state armed actors both a political concern and an important qualifying challenge to conventional wisdom. In highlighting the main forms of non-state armed action in these contexts, and their uniqueness in light of the prevailing assumptions, I focus heavily on private police as an increasingly visible non-state armed actor. As an object of study, private police have fallen below the scholarly radar in most literature on state stability and security conditions. Yet their emergence is on the rise in the contemporary world because of changing state and sovereignty conditions, and their existence and activities underscore a fundamental lacuna in the literature on the origins of violence and political stability offered by security scholars and practitioners alike.

### **States, Sovereignties, and Non-Armed State Actors: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations**

To analytically ground the empirical evidence and narrative presented in this paper, we begin by turning attention to theories of the state, and to the relationship between the nature, functions, and priorities of non-state armed actors and sovereignty. The rationale for making this connection lies in the important works of Max Weber and his more contemporary interpreter Charles Tilly, who showed that state-making has been connected to war-making to a great degree; that successful state formation depends on monopolization of the means of coercion; and that the conditions of sovereignty enabled by successful state formation depend on the forging of reciprocal connections between rulers and ruled.<sup>17</sup>

The basic argument is that in order to defend or establish its sovereignty, a state engages in warfare (usually against other existent or putative states), with inter-state violence fuelling both the fires of warfare and modern state-formation. To the extent that engaging armed actors to fight war requires resources, the state in turn creates

new institutions (government bureaucracies), new revenue sources (taxes), and new avenues for securing legitimacy (citizenship rights) that allow it to extract funds and moral support from the citizenry, in the process building stronger state-society connections. These institutions, revenues, and legitimacy claims form the basic building blocks of the modern state, whose capacity to endure and strengthen its sovereignty rests on the capacity of its own coercive forces (military, police, and other state armed actors) to monopolize the means of violence. In short, the struggle to establish state sovereignty rests on armed force, even as the institutional and fiscal capacity to use armed force rests on state power. A closer examination of non-state armed actors suggests that a parallel dynamic may be at play, albeit in non-state domains, where armed actors without allegiance to the nation-state are also engaged in struggles over sovereignty and allegiance.

To be more specific: in a globalizing world where neoliberal political and economic policies are ascendant, citizens become less connected to national states as a source of political support or social and economic claim-making,<sup>18</sup> and more tied to alternative 'imagined communities' of loyalties built either on essentialist identities like ethnicity, race or religion or on spatially-circumscribed allegiances and networks of social and economic production and reproduction.<sup>19</sup> These processes are speeded by 'the societal changes associated with the accessibility of information technology that stimulate networked organizational forms', in turn affecting the nature of conflict and crime by empowering 'non-state entities' and altering the global political landscape.<sup>20</sup> To the extent that alternative imagined communities of allegiance and reciprocity provide new forms of welfare, employment, and meaning, they often operate as the functional equivalents of states, thus encouraging new forms of 'non-state sovereignty'<sup>21</sup> that contrast to the imagined national communities that sustained modern nation-state formation and traditional patterns of sovereignty, along the lines articulated by Benedict Anderson.<sup>22</sup> When these new imagined communities exist apart from (if not in opposition to) traditional nation-states, they often choose (or are forced) to rely on their own armed actors to sustain, nurture, or protect their activities and dominion, especially when they conflict with national state priorities.

This dynamic could readily describe the sets of allegiances, loyalties, and impacts of guerrilla forces and other more conventionally defined non-state armed actors who might conceptualize themselves as an alternative 'imagined community' of rebels fighting against an oppressive nation-state, as seen in Sudan, Somalia, Congo, and other countries caught in the vicious cycle of civil war or politicized armed conflicts.<sup>23</sup> But it is becoming increasingly clear that these same general dynamics are evident in the activities and priorities of those who have not conventionally been studied in the literature on non-state armed actors, including drug smugglers, mafias, youth gangs, and citizen militias in more stable democratic countries who use armed force but also share social loyalties and common economic objectives in ways that sustain alternative reciprocities and solidarity to each other rather than the state.

Granted the concept of imagined communities was developed in order to account for the emergence of a territorially bounded nationalism predominant in the 19th and

20th centuries, built around a limited and sovereign political community based on 'deep, horizontal comradeship'.<sup>24</sup> That is, this notion was built on an understanding of strong and visceral connections within and between citizens and the state, and thus it is hard to think of drug lords and street gangs fitting neatly into such a conceptual apparatus, not just in terms of their disengagement with formal nationalism but also in terms of strong connections with a wide range of citizens. All too often, in fact, these types of activities alienate neighbours and residents who are caught up in the violence generated by these non-state armed actors. But if we look carefully at Anderson's original work and its meaning, there are significant elements that suggest the continued relevance of the concept of imagined community, albeit rethought to account for the shifting territorial bases of sovereignty and allegiance that also make more contemporary imagined communities 'new' or different from the past.

Foremost, Anderson's deployment of this concept drew its rationale and definitional contours not from universal claims about the conditions under which citizens and the state would always unite, but as a descriptor of a particular historical moment during which territorially based nationalism became ascendant in the 19th and early 20th century. As such, Anderson conceived of the networks of political reciprocity that created the imagined national community as both limited and sovereign precisely because those were the territorialities of the times: in his words, limited because 'no nation imagine[d] itself co-terminous with mankind' and sovereign because the Enlightenment had shifted legitimate authority out of religious institutions and into the state. The territorialities of today suggest that political communities of reciprocity are no longer limited in the same way as before, owing to globalization and transnational flows of peoples and ideas, and to the fact that states are neither uniformly legitimate nor the only authority in an increasingly inter-connected and globalized world. But this does not mean political communities of reciprocity (or imagined communities) have disappeared, only that they are transforming in scale and scope – hence our desire to accommodate an understanding of these changes and recast them in the context of a 'new imagined community' nomenclature. Stated somewhat differently, rather than conceptually throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water, we seek to explain how and why the connections that tie citizens together and to other forms of sovereignty or authority may bring them into a political imaginary that stands as separate to the nation state in a new or alternative imagined community, if you will.

The issue of deep, horizontal comradeship identified by Anderson as key to his notion of the imagined communities may be more of a conceptual challenge, because as noted above the types of violence-laden activities examined here are not generally thought of as providing the basis for extensive social connection. Moreover, that many of the new activities and forms of networking are transnational in character suggests that there inevitably will be trade-offs between closeness in social relations (or comradeship) and territorial extension of networks or reciprocities that fuel gang, mafia, and other forms of non-state armed action. As Mark Granovetter's notion of the 'strength of weak ties' suggests,<sup>25</sup> this does not necessarily mean that there are not forms of comradeship or connection among the

purveyors of these activities and/or the communities from which they emanate. In addition to the inadvertent solidarities created through weak ties, much depends on the scale and nature of the activities under question. Private police working for community clients can create a general sense of civic solidarity, especially if they self-define their aims as protecting larger values in society, as occurred in South Africa after the end of apartheid rule,<sup>26</sup> or as is now current among private police in Mexico City who see themselves on the fault lines of 'war' against criminal forces who threaten to disrupt daily life.<sup>27</sup> And even among those whose activities span larger territorial distances, 'community without propinquity' can emerge, something Melvin Webber proclaimed long ago.<sup>28</sup>

Remember also that Anderson was offering a much more materialist argument for the rise of nationalism/imagined communities, built on an understanding of the emergence of print capitalism and the utility of shared language, not on intrinsic social or cultural identities, blood ties, or other essentialist forms of fraternity. Not only should this caution us against romanticizing or essentializing the notion of community, it also should remind us to seek the material underpinnings of these connections. In the contemporary era, new technologies and new trade connections link networks of citizens and their activities to home-based communities where deep personal ties may still persist, despite the distances covered. Some have even argued that technological changes have reconfigured local community relations and networks in ways that mark a significant spatial departure from the past, while still preserving the notion of community more generally.<sup>29</sup> Overall, scholarship on territorial and technological trends suggest that social ties and the scales upon which they operate have not disappeared so much as been transformed, thereby creating alternative foundations for imagined communities that differ in significant ways from those of prior periods. We have this in mind when we speak of 'new' imagined communities.

An example of just this type of new imagined community, built on both local and transnationally linked armed actions and loyalties, appeared last spring in the Mexican industrial city of Laredo, in the Northern state of Nuevo Laredo not far from the US-Mexican border. A renowned drug mafia cartel called the *Zetas* hung a banner on a downtown pedestrian bridge calling for 'military recruits and ex-military men. . . seeking a good salary, food, and help for their families' to join them and support their activities. The banner promised no more 'suffering maltreatment or hunger', while a local phone number was posted for contact.<sup>30</sup> The hubris of a drug mafia publicly announcing efforts to recruit new loyalists to a countervailing social and political project defined in direct opposition to a sovereign state and its rule of law, but using the same principles of welfare reciprocity and solidarity, would have been almost unimaginable a decade ago. But in the contemporary era, transnational crime networks are as visible – and almost as legitimate – as national states in many parts of the world, finding loyalty and a sense of community among citizen supporters whose lives become spatially or socially embedded in their powerful criminal orbits.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, after the Laredo announcement citizens in 11 other cities across Mexico responded by hanging public banners asking the country's president to take a 'neutral' stance in the fight against drug-traffickers, so as not to tip

the balance towards either the military or the *narcos*, a plea they justified by underscoring the fact that many of Mexico own military personnel were as corrupted and involved in the drug trade as the *Zetas*.<sup>32</sup>

To a certain extent, elements of this situation hark back to medieval, absolutist, and pre-modern periods before successful state formation, described by Perry Anderson and others, when princely elites, regional warlords, or other territorially circumscribed power-brokers wielded control of territories, markets, and subjects. They were the quintessential ‘non-state armed actors’ because they existed in a world before the advent of the modern state. But there is a parallel in today’s world. Non-state armed actors in new imagined communities are operating in ways that pose a challenge to longstanding institutions of sovereignty structured around citizen and armed force loyalty to the modern-nation state and the state-society social contract. If we loosen the strict definition of sovereignty to accommodate the more general concepts of ‘power and authority’, ‘self-government’, and the existence of ‘independent’ territories,<sup>33</sup> this means we are living in world of new sovereignties, a point already advanced by Arjun Appadurai<sup>34</sup> and taken an empirical step further in Dennis Rogers’ work on ‘social sovereignty’.<sup>35</sup>

What *most* distinguishes the contemporary situation from the pre-modern, however, as well as the immediate past is the fact that these new imagined communities are struggling for ‘alternative forms of sovereignty’ – power, authority, independence, and self-governance on a variety of territorial scales, whether formal or informal – in an environment *where traditional institutions of national sovereignty and the power of the nation-state still exist and must be reckoned with*.<sup>36</sup> Stated simply, the new imagined communities of the contemporary world do not exist in an historical vacuum. They co-exist and overlap with the modern state, and by so doing have a feedback effect on ‘old’ imagined communities (e.g. the national state) and their relationship to society, by virtue of their capacity to de-legitimize, weaken, or challenge political allegiance to the nation-state. The challenge for contemporary security studies scholarship is to examine both overlapping and competing states, sovereignties, and non-state armed actors, and to examine their impact on violence and insecurity both with respect to nation-states and society as a whole. Just as important, scholars must examine the practical and theoretical implications of these developments.

In the service of both aims, in the remaining pages I will establish where the activities of contemporary non-state armed actors focused on securing economic dominion are emerging with most frequency, explain why, and show how they challenge the stability and efficacy of consolidated and/or democratic states, with different dynamics perhaps, but similarly de-stabilizing effects as in poor, politically contested, and/or authoritarian states. I also will argue that de-legitimization or weakening of the national state in the face of alternative imagined communities of non-state actors suggests a shift in the action domain of armed force from state to civil society, as well as a potential blurring of the line between different categories of armed actors and between public and private. I end with a discussion of the ways that these shifts make it more difficult to establish conditions of security and stability, even as they raise new analytical questions about conventional

categorizations of states, armed and non-armed actors, and the nature of sovereignty in the modern world.

### **New Territorial Dynamics of Non-State Armed Action: The Urban Frontlines of Conflict**

In prior epochs of more conventional war-making, when state armed actors monopolized the means of violence, sovereignty used to be about asserting and legitimizing political power over a fixed territorial domain that established the same national boundaries of allegiance for citizens and state alike. Capital, whether globally or locally extracted, served as a source of funds for arming state actors who engaged in war to protect national boundaries and the citizens within them. States frequently made alliances with local capitalists to supplant the state's territorial sovereignty and war-making aims; in return they protected markets, so that flows of resources could be guaranteed for state activities, war-related or not. All this constituted what Charles Tilly so aptly identified as a protection racket.<sup>37</sup> In today's world, many non-state armed actors also rely on sources of global and local capital, and by so doing they diminish both the legitimacy and resource-extraction capacities of national states, even as they relocate the territorial domain and reach of protection rackets to other scales, both sub-national and international. This has brought new networks of individuals and economic activities connected in and across transnational or sub-national territories, in which armed actors acting on behalf of these new networks – or protection rackets – sometimes wield as much coercive power than do their 'host' nation-states, at least in particular locations and territories.

Such trends are evident by focusing on the main purveyors of violence in the contemporary era, and by highlighting their territorial location. Two or more decades ago, the military, paramilitary, and police tended to monopolize the means of violence, using repressive actions against rebellious citizens identified with warlike terminology as 'enemies of the state'. Much of this conflict centred in rural areas or in regions excluded from the urban-based or elite-dominated developmental gains that accompanied late development. Today, although civil wars, agrarian or rural-based rebel movements still persist in a select subset of countries around the world, violence and 'warfare' are more likely to unfold in cities, especially capital cities.<sup>38</sup> They also are just as likely to be associated with the activities of drug cartels, mafias, non-state militias, citizens acting as vigilantes, and private police (providing protection for both individuals and firms) as with political insurgency. Moreover, whereas in the past much of the armed violence was associated with roaming rebel or guerrilla opposition, in today's world non-state armed actors locate their command and control functions in fixed settings, in neighbourhoods and communities strategically located in large cities and/or in strategic border or exchange areas, many of which sustain their transnational reach.

Several of these dynamics are embodied in the activities and identities of the Mara Salvatrucha, known widely as 'los Maras', a gang whose social and economic activities link a network of Spanish-speaking youth from their origins in Los Angeles through Mexico down into the major cities of Guatemala and El Salvador in a

self-identified community of loyalties, whose strength has only accelerated in the wake of state efforts to incarcerate urban gang members (where they only strengthen their networks, plan new operations, and become more strategic opponents to the state). But what is most significant about the Maras is not so much their self-identified gang status but their origins as a group of city-based youth who turned to criminal activity because of the lack of employment alternatives in the large metropolitan areas of California, Mexico, and Central America. Both the urban and employment aspects of their formation as a transnational 'alternative imagined community' speak loudly to the prevalence of city-based, non-state armed actors all over the burgeoning metropolises of the global south, even as they underscore the temporality of this phenomenon.<sup>39</sup> Indeed the rapid growth of cities in the developing world has become one of the major social, economic, and demographic challenges of the contemporary era. We are entering an age where almost half the world is urban and where the majority of population growth will be concentrated in large cities in formerly poor countries of the world, most predominantly in East Asia, South Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Rapid urbanization has brought with it a huge set of problems, primarily employment and housing scarcities, which if not resolved will destroy old bonds of community and solidarity among citizens, and which also fuel insecurity and the resort to armed force.<sup>40</sup>

In the rapidly transforming urban environments of the global south, residents find few job opportunities in the industrial sector, a situation which forces larger numbers of residents into informal employment (in commerce and trade primarily) or other means of securing their livelihood.<sup>41</sup> In Mexico City, for example, official estimates identify close to 70 per cent of the urban labour force as employed in the informal sector, and within this category, petty commerce and street vending often predominate. Such employment, which barely meets subsistence needs for many stuck within it, has become ever more 'illicit' as protectionist barriers drop and fewer domestic goods for re-sale are produced, and as the globalization of trade in contraband and illegal goods picks up the slack. As a result, much informal employment is physically and socially situated within an illicit world of violence and impunity, not just because of the sheer illegality of many of the goods traded, but also because to be involved in guns, drugs, and other contraband products (pirated CDs, knock-off designer goods, valuable gems in the case of natural resource-rich African cities) frequently necessitates the deployment of one's own 'armed forces' for protection against the long arm of the state, whether the police or customs inspectors.<sup>42</sup> These forces also fight amongst themselves for control of illicit supply chains, further creating an environment of violence.

Well-organized cadres involved in these illicit activities often take on the functionally equivalent role of mini-states by monopolizing the means of violence and providing protection in exchange for loyalty and territorial dominion.<sup>43</sup> But as mini-states they also participate in their own form of 'foreign policy', that is negotiating, baiting, or cooperating with the sovereign states in whose territory they operate. The result is often the development of clandestine connections between local police, mafias, and the informal sector, as well as the isolation of certain territorial areas as locations for these activities.<sup>44</sup>

The physical concentration of dangerous illegal activities in territorial locations that function as 'no man's lands' outside state control further drives the problems of impunity, insecurity, and violence on the part of non-state armed actors. Historically, border areas between nation-states have played this role, with constantly shifting populations preventing networks of reciprocity and social control to strengthen sufficiently to insure that violence and danger would still flourish, despite the efforts of authorities to control movement in and out of border areas. But as urbanization changes cities into dense conglomerations of peoples and activities, and as illicit trade becomes a principal source of livelihood, we see the same patterns in cities. Certain areas begin to serve the refuge for illegal activities and shifting flows of people and goods. In many cities of the global south, these dangerous areas sit nestled against old central business districts (CBD), where local chambers of commerce face a declining manufacturing base and are especially desperate to attract high-end corporate investors and financial services. Some of this owes to the importance of maintaining a physical proximity to large markets of consumers who will buy informal or illegal goods. But whatever the origin, these spacial dynamics further drive the conflict as the upper and lower ends of the commercial spectrum compete to control the same space. When the successful introduction of urban mega-projects or other downtown development schemes physically displaces those who earn their living in informal sector, their sources of economic livelihood are disrupted, driving more and more to illegal activities and the use of violence to maintain their supply chains. Yet the presence of so much informality and violence in centrally located areas of large cities is often what motivates high-end developers to push for urban renewal and other major renovations of central business districts in the first place.<sup>45</sup>

Globalization has added even more urgency to these contradictory processes as real estate development and the physical creation of upscale 'global cities' has emerged as a key source of grease for the wheels of capital accumulation in the global economy.<sup>46</sup> The upshot is a clash of forces, if not development models, between competing sets of actors both seeking to maintain their dominion in strategically located urban spaces, with non-state armed actors involved in protecting illegal and informal activities a key set of actors embroiled in this larger conflict.<sup>47</sup>

These struggles parallel yet depart from the traditional forms of political struggle waged by non-state armed actors against states discussed in much of the conventional literature. On one hand, the state is involved in this conflict by virtue of its deployment of urban planners and police to displace the local populations who fight to maintain their locations and activities downtown. But the non-state armed actors who are involved in protecting their turf and physical territory, and who assert their political and economic power through illicit rather than licit networks of trade and distribution, are not struggling for political dominion, control of the state, or a reversal in patterns of political exclusion. Rather, they seek economic dominion, and their desire is to not to politically control national territory (as states do), so much as to control key local nodes and transnational networks that make their economic activities possible.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, they are as likely to use armed force in a defensive way, that is, to keep the state out of their affairs, rather than to insert themselves in the state's affairs.

To be sure, not all informal sector workers in cities of the global south should be classified as non-state armed actors involved in illegal or illicit activities. Nor do they all operate in a transnational orbit of illegality that drives them to use armed force to protect themselves and their means of livelihood from state intervention. But what many of these poor urban residents do hold in common in the contemporary era is a network of obligations and reciprocities in a given spatial context that is not necessarily coincident with the nation-state.<sup>49</sup> The more transnational the supply chain of goods in which these citizens are involved, the more likely that money and/or commodity exchange fuels the connections; while the larger the sums of money are involved, the more likely will these networks of reciprocity will fuel an environment of illegality and thus violence. And to the extent that these communities of non-state armed actors involved in transnational networks of violence have the capacity to challenge the national-state's control of the means of coercion, the state and its hold on sovereignty and security is under direct challenge.

In these and other regards, the problems produced by many of these 'non-conventional' non-state armed actors may be as debilitating and threatening to the institutional capacities and democratic character of the state as were the more 'conventional' non-state armed actors (guerrillas, rebels, etc.) that dominated the literature in prior decades. This has been clearly shown in Mexico, in the actions of drug mafias and other armed actors, who have waged war against local police and military in an ongoing battle that has pushed the state to introduce authoritarian measures and legislation that limit general civil liberties and concentrate power in a small circle of high-level officials.<sup>50</sup> Such patterns are also clear in other countries or regions of the world, with Brazil, Argentina, Russia, and South Africa only a few of the many nations where smuggling rings that rely on armed protection have come into violent conflict with the state or citizens.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, in some of these settings the power and influence of mafias has at times been so great, owing to the huge sums of money involved, that mafia elements directly infiltrate those state's agencies charged with coercion.<sup>52</sup> Infiltration or rampant rent-seeking further limits the state's capacity to reduce overall violence and insecurity. With inside knowledge of the state's strategies and intelligence gathering breached, the state cannot function as an all-powerful sovereign entity, nor is it capable of upholding a rule of law, despite its democratic status and electorally legitimate hold on power.

Such conditions not only undermine the state's effective sovereignty; they also require new political or legislative strategies for dealing with these highly elusive yet economically consequential non-state armed actors, ranging from restructuring or eliminating entire state agencies to instituting new legal measures or constitutional changes for defining criminality and empowering the courts, police, and military to fight against non-state armed actors without violating the established norms of governance. These requisites have a direct feedback affect on the nature of the state and its institutional structures, the most visible of which are reflected in efforts to centralize power and authority in new coercive apparatuses capable of controlling or eliminating non-state armed actors. Yet these reforms hold the capacity to undermine the state's democratic underpinnings by promoting the unfettered use of state violence to stem a losing battle against corruption, mafias, and drug trade.

### **Urban Nation, State Formation, and the Peculiarities of Late Development**

The proliferation of non-state armed actors rooted in cities throughout the global south, but who operate transnationally and thus escape effective regulation, is not merely a problem for individual cities or states and their capacities to govern and/or monopolize the means of coercion. The presence of so many armed actors involved in illegal and illicit supply chains has dramatically transformed the quality of life more generally, with the declining security situation generating citizen unhappiness with the state and, at times, even with democratic institutions. Not that long ago optimism reigned in many developing countries about benefits to be gained by the democratic transition; but dreams of progress have steadily dimmed as problems of violence, crime, and insecurity have proliferated with a vengeance, especially in cities.<sup>53</sup>

Citizens are frustrated with the state, mainly because little headway has been made in eliminating urban crime and violence. This is a result not just of the infiltration of criminal elements into the governing state apparatus, as noted earlier, but also because those charged with keeping order and guaranteeing the rule of law on behalf of the state, that is the police and/or the military, are themselves frequently implicated in abusive practices or criminality.<sup>54</sup> And although patterns of urban violence are linked to illicit activities undertaken by mafias and criminal gangs who run the supply and distribution of contraband, these activities persist with the tacit support of the police and even the military, whose priorities are often protection of their own institutional sovereignty and/or involvement in these black market activities rather than protection of citizens who suffer in the precarious urban environment where informality flourishes and the rule of law remains elusive.

The result is growing cynicism and a renewed sense of hopelessness about both the future and the potential of a democratic political system to deal with extra-legal violence and impunity. State legitimacy is on the decline; instead of letting elected officials and their regulatory agents fight the problems of crime, growing numbers of citizens reject formal political channels and look for their own answers to the problems of insecurity in everyday life. The upside of this trend may be that citizens mobilize among themselves or become directly involved in civil society efforts to monitor crime and reduce insecurity.<sup>55</sup> But there also is a downside. Anxiety about the urban security situation and the state's inability to guarantee order has become so extreme in certain contexts that citizens turn to violence themselves – whether in the form of vigilantism, seen as a last-gasp measure for achieving some sense of citizen justice, whether by self-arming or other forms of protection, or whether through the embrace of a life of crime, so as to be on the giving rather than the receiving end of a growing environment of insecurity – in order to establish some control over their daily existence.<sup>56</sup> In this way, violence originally generated by non-state armed actors involved in illegal, illicit activities lays the contours for a declining urban security situation, which in turn widens the circle of armed action by pushing urban citizens into the world of violence as well, sometimes even motivating them to deploy violence against others out of sheer frustration with the state's incapacity to deliver security.

One result is yet another type of vicious cycle, one that parallels the ‘conflict trap’ identified by Paul Collier in his seminal work on violence in the poor and unstable countries of the African continent, but whose dynamics unfold in middle-income cities within and between urban residents who are trying to control the security situation in the face of everyday violence linked to trade and a relatively well-capitalized urban economy. This type of urban insecurity is more a problem for civil society than the state, because it permeates and transforms everyday life by fuelling homicides, accelerating crime rates (despite a decline in reportage by victims), justifying lynching and other vigilante acts, and impacting inter-personal violence, all in ways that restrict citizens’ abilities to move freely without fear of armed robbery, violent attack, or extortion.<sup>57</sup> In this environment, it is no surprise that citizens arm themselves, hire private security guards, act offensively as much as defensively in battling insecurity, and barricade themselves in gated private communities, all actions which contribute – in perception if not reality – to the environment of fear and insecurity.

That these problems are as likely to emerge in the newly democratized and aspiring middle-income nations of Central and South America, South Africa, and Southeast Asia, as in the poorer and not yet democratic nations of the world, returns us to our originating concerns with questions about the origins of these new patterns of non-state armed action, violence, and insecurity. If these problems neither emerge nor concentrate in the types of regimes proposed in the conventional literature, why not? And why would other regime-types, even democratic ones, become host to such problems?

The answer to these questions lies partly in the ways that past development trajectories rotted the coercive apparatuses of the developmental state from within, bringing corrupt regimes that may now be formally democratic, but that have been incapable of squelching the capacities of non-state armed actors and citizens to take the situation into their own hands. These states could be considered to have lost much of their sovereignty, in *de facto* if not *de jure* terms, at least to the extent that everyday citizens and non-state armed actors bypass the state in their search for security, relying instead on their own networks and communities of identity and/or coercive action. And to find the origins of these shifting patterns, and the reasons why they are most likely to plague developmental states that have made considerable political and economic progress, we must turn to history, and to the ways that prior battles over state formation and sovereignty laid the foundations for the shifts we see today.

For large portions of the 19th and early 20th century, most countries of the developing world suffered through continuous conflicts over sovereignty, seen initially in struggles for independence from colonial powers, in the form of civil wars and other similarly weighty regional conflicts, and, in a few cases, in revolution or other protracted battles leading to a major political rupture with a colonial or liberal past. Most of these countries shared a history of centre-region tensions over the mercantilist nature of the national economy and the efforts to centralize power; longstanding battles between agrarian and industrial elites about the nature of the state and the direction of the economy; pervasive social uprisings and rebellion on the part of

the nation's most impoverished citizens, whose exclusion from the governing pact fuelled their collective ire; and the emergence of professional military linked to the power elite (regionally, nationally, or both). All of these conflicts gave life to a single important fact: the persistence of ongoing struggles over the nature, character, and direction of state power.

While the roots of contestation over state-building and state power may have initially traced to the colonial period, struggles persisted beyond formal independence and marked the political and economic landscape of most of the developing world throughout the 20th century, producing a highly conflictive political environment in which an abusive state apparatus, untrammelled coercive power, and violence all flowered. In an effort to advance and protect their state-building efforts, most governments in the developing world exercised considerable coercive power against real and potential enemies, and these practices ultimately helped institutionalize police corruption and the coercive power of an authoritarian state whose pervasive use of violence and disregard for the rule of law ultimately permeated civil society as well. Complicating matters, most states – whether consolidated with a recognized sovereignty or struggling to hold onto power – were also faced with the challenges of rapid economic development. This meant that in addition to consolidating state power vis-à-vis political or ideological enemies, most late developmental states found it essential to manage if not control the rural labour force, a nascent working class, and/or an organized agrarian elite, all while trying to mobilize capitalists. Having a strong military and police were essential to these goals as well as undermining any citizen opposition to this larger developmental project. Accordingly, economic development aims reinforced regime consolidation aims and vice-versa, with both justifying a greater coercive power of the state.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, and just as important for our understanding of the coercive aspects of the state, in many countries of the world the dual challenges of consolidating state power and growing the economy frequently unfolded within the context of rapid urbanization, precisely because economies of scale and consumer markets concentrated industrial development in a few cities. This was particularly the case in the countries of Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and much less so in Africa, where rapid and intense urbanization came late and where the locus of political and economic power remained rural. In the developing countries where urbanization served as a third leg of modernization, along with political and economic development, police were as significant as the military in fulfilling the state's political, economic, and even social aims, and thereby extending the coercive arm of the state into the everyday life of large portions of the nation's citizens. This was so not only because large cities served as home to much of the industrial working class and the owners of industrial establishments that the police sought to protect. Police also became central actors because the rapidly urbanizing locales required additional forms of control and regulation – relating to the production and consumption of new goods and services, the provision and management of transportation and traffic, the inspection of markets, and the monitoring of the urban unemployed and indigent, to name but a few – that were necessary in order

to grow the commercial economy and guarantee social order in an environment where rural migrants, informal sector workers, and other new social actors appeared on the scene in droves.

In this complicated environment of rapid urbanization, industrialization, and state formation, in which the government's longevity and successes depended on its coercive capacities to hold onto state power, grow the economy, and manage the rapid population shift from countryside to city, the power of the police expanded by leaps and bounds, often to the point where tensions developed vis-à-vis the military – although sometimes, as in Brazil, the corpus of 'beat police' are actually a bureaucratic arm of the military. With police becoming more and more involved in everyday urban life, and the military struggling to keep its privileged position as the arm of the state used to root out enemies and defend the national interest, tensions often emerged within these coercive arms of the state as well as between them and the citizenry. One result is that the military and the police – as individuals and institutionally – were given extraordinary leeway and operated with very little state-imposed discipline.

These legacies empowered the late developmental state's coercive apparatuses in ways that undermined the judicial system and facilitated corruption and impunity both within the state and society. Indeed, with cities expanding ever more rapidly and hosting more informality, police soon learned that rent-seeking with respect to this growing and vulnerable sector of society was an activity that served both their interests. Informal sellers would bribe officials if it meant avoiding court-based prosecution for urban violations; yet the police also gained more from diverting 'justice' away from the higher courts, where they similarly had little influence, to the streets where face-to-face negotiation with citizens usually produced some sort of financial transaction.<sup>59</sup>

### **From the State to Civil Society? Shifting Domains of Armed Force and the Decline of State Sovereignty**

Such abuses of power may have served the state and citizens during the difficult times when both poverty and employment patterns made face-to-face accommodation a rational response to scarcity and uncertainty, but over time they delegitimized the court system, reinforced corruption and impunity in the police, undermined the rule of law, and ultimately led citizens to reduce trust in the state's coercive forces while also seeking to find their own agents of security and protection. Under these conditions, coercive practices and *de facto* sovereignty allegiances began shifting away from the state and a stable state-society contract, and more toward citizens who network among themselves to provide services and welfare. Such dynamics are well evidenced by the exponential growth of private police, who increasingly taking on activities previously provided by the state, including protecting private homes, workplaces, and transport routes. To be sure, the rise of private police is a world-wide phenomenon. But it is especially evident in those urban environments of the global south where citizens feel they cannot count on public police for protection, owing to the high degrees of corruption and impunity. As such, this phenomenon

is of particular visibility and significance in developing countries with a history of authoritarianism, even those where political and economic transition has been successful, because the authoritarian state frequently encouraged a culture of impunity within its coercive apparatuses.

When citizens bypass state channels and turn to non-state actors like private police for protection, the state itself loses a key function and some of its legitimacy, even if the logic seems quite appropriate. To some extent, this is a vicious cycle: if citizens do not struggle for government accountability and transparency in rooting out corruption and cleaning up the police, the state will not go the extra mile in attacking the police, since this is a costly and uphill battle. Yet in the absence of concrete gains in rooting out police corruption, citizens become further alienated from the government, driving them to alternative imagined communities of reciprocity to solve the insecurity problem. This new imagined community might be one of outraged citizens mobilizing against the state for greater security, as seen recently in Mexico City in the mass mobilizations of hundreds of thousands. It might be seen in the form of creating new business-citizen partnerships around security provision, a model used in Johannesburg in the form of a Business Improvement District (BID). Yet it might also be seen in the form of local citizens taking on policing activities themselves, whether in the form of lynching or vigilantism.

But such anarchic citizen responses have a direct impact on the state and its legitimate sovereignty, even as they raise troubling questions about democracy and the rule of law more generally. When ever more individuals start bearing arms as a condition of their employment in private security services, and citizens themselves start to carry guns for self-protection from criminals and police alike, violent 'resolutions' to questions of public insecurity become the norm, thereby fueling the vicious circle of violence and insecurity. The overall security situation can deteriorate further when 'private' police compete with 'public' police for a monopoly over the means of violence and the legitimacy to use force. In both Mexico City and Johannesburg, two highly violent cities, there have been instances of 'public' and 'private' police forces, not to mention communities themselves, engaging in conflict over who has the right to protect and arrest citizens. Such tensions between different 'imagined communities' of reciprocity bring a collision of loyalties and allegiances, with private police serving and protecting their clients and public police acting on behalf of a sovereign state and its rule of law. The upshot is an environment of fear and insecurity where competing or overlapping imagined communities struggle to hold dominion. Such a situation is well seen in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, where citizens are as likely to support local drug lords because they guarantee protection and 'local sovereignty' better than do police or the state.<sup>60</sup>

Complicating matters, as private police grow in numbers and citizens rely on them for protection, there is less discussion about the larger social contract in which security is to be guaranteed as well as increasing ambiguity about the conditions under which private police can take on public police functions, or vice-versa. In the most democratic nations, where there is strong and relatively widespread commitment to a shared social and political contract between ruler and ruled, as in

South Africa, citizens are trying to monitor the situation so as to limit private police powers. Citizens and politicians have worked to impose legislative controls on private police, and they have deliberated over how to insure that public police still protect citizens, in ways that reinforce the state's role as guarantor of the constitution and rule of law. But in those nations where democracy is less well entrenched, where the state remains weak, or where the citizenry is divided about how much trust it will put in the police or the state, very little headway has been made in limiting the power of private police vis-à-vis public police.

In Mexico, for example, where democratic transition has exacerbated vicious conflict between political parties and interest groups so as to make police reform almost impossible, corruption remains rampant and people turn to private police for security. As a result, it is hard to find public support to limit private police actions, and they have become almost as unaccountable as public police. This fact is evidenced by rising complaints about human-rights abuses lodged against private police by citizens, a state of affairs echoed in Brazil as well, where some citizens claim that off-duty cops who take on the role of private police are responsible for more extra-judicial killings than the public police. In an environment where there is insufficient state or citizen capacity to limit private security forces, we also see private police withholding evidence from public police in order to protect their own 'monopolization' of the means of coercion, meaning prior legal procedures and democratic fundamentals associated with a single rule of law start to break down. This only encourages the fragmentation of the citizenry into distinct imagined communities, if you will – further legitimizing the proliferation of more non-state armed actors, each protecting their sub-national or transnational network of clients, imagined communities, and alternative sovereignties.

The problem is not just competition between state and non-state armed actors, however. In some countries the problem is the overlap, or a blurring of lines, between armed forces working in and outside the state. This is not only clear in those countries like Mexico, where poorly paid public police frequently moonlight as private police at night; it also occurs in situations when those who are expelled from public police service for corruption (as in Mexico) or after regime change (as in South Africa after apartheid) become private police. Whatever the source, when the same individuals or networks of armed professionals move back and forth between the state and civil society, sharing knowledge and personal relations, it is harder for citizens to leverage institutional accountability, and abuse of coercive power is more likely to continue.

The *de facto* blurring of lines between public and private police, much like the overlaps between civilian and state-based armed actors evidenced by the clandestine reciprocities between criminals and police, poses several challenges to conventional research on state and non-state armed actors. First, both examples support our originating concerns about the ambiguities in definition, even as they raise questions about which category of armed state actors would be most likely to undermine (or uphold) a stable and sovereign state and its rule of law. Increasingly, it is hard for citizens to know whether public police, private police, the military, local vigilante groups, or even criminal mafias will be most likely to protect

them from harm, or to know whether any or all of these armed actors will use violence against them. In the absence of any certainty about which armed actors or state/non-state institutions are most likely to guarantee protection and security, citizens turn to their own informal institutions and mechanisms for protection. By and large, these informal practices bypass the nation-state, further undermining its legitimate sovereignty.

More important perhaps, the conceptual blurring of lines between different types of armed actors poses new security concerns that have implications for both theory and practical action. One of the most troubling is evident in yet a third form of categorical 'boundary crossing', one that has become increasingly common in the contemporary era as new armed state action continues to grow in importance and visibility: the growing interconnections between conventionally defined armed actors politically focused on battles for state power, and 'alternative' non-state armed actors focused on securing or strengthening economic dominion. With global smuggling on the rise in a world of ever more fluid national boundaries, and with the imagined community of the nation-state decreasing in relation to alternative local and transnational networks of allegiance, there are increasing opportunities for old-style political insurgents with nationalist political projects to take advantage of the power and activities of non-state armed actors.<sup>61</sup> This is evidenced by the fact that rebels, terrorists and guerrillas – or those more conventionally defined as non-state armed actors concerned with political regime change – increasingly fuel their political activities through connections with 'newer' forms of non-state armed actors who seek economic advantage, that is, those involved in contraband and illicit trade activities, and vice-versa. Some examples include Hezbollah's reliance on Colombia drug traffickers for funds, the Taliban's use of the opium trade for financial resources, and Somali rebels' engagement with pirates and other criminal groups who control trade running through waters off the African coast.

These activities not only call into question prior scholarly efforts to categorize armed action as having either political *or* economic motivations; they also make much more difficult the efforts of states – or even global actors and institutions – to eliminate the sources of insecurity. When a battle is purely political or purely economic, it is easier to identify 'counter-insurgent' strategies to isolate or undermine these forces, either through direct military action or by mobilizing citizens to contribute to the isolation or de-legitimization of rebel forces. The same is true when an enemy operates only on one scale, whether local, national, *or* transnational. But when these networks of actors collude, or when imagined communities who define themselves around economic sovereignty start sharing networks with those seeking political sovereignty, and when this strongly networked set of armed actors operate on multiple scales simultaneously (using transnational economic activities to fight local politics, for example, or local politics to sustain transnational economic activities), the challenges are immense. Both strategically and analytically, it is difficult to decipher which territorial or ideological point of entry might give the best leverage, indicating in turn that scholars and practitioners need to identify new strategies for establishing security and fighting non-state armed action.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the ‘Coercive Transition’, Non-State Armed Actors, and Insecurity in the Modern World**

These examples suggest that one key challenge of the contemporary epoch is to come to terms with the fact that we are living in a ‘coercive transition’. That is, we seem to be exiting a Westphalian world where most coercive force has been monopolized in the hands of nation-states, and entering a new epoch where local and transnational non-state actors take on those roles, either because the nation-state is weak or non-state actors are overly strong, or because the strength of the latter fuels the weakness of the former, and vice-versa.<sup>62</sup> This pattern, which dominated in the pre-modern era before the rise of nation-states, used to be confined primarily to the poor and non-democratic countries and regions of the world that never fully consolidated state power. But now it is expanding in geographic scope, and appears in middle-income countries of the global south. To the extent that the wealthier and more democratic nations of the world, whether England or the United States, are being pulled into this global orbit through transnational activities that cross developmental boundaries, then we really must see this as a global and temporal transition that affects us all. In the face of these changes, new questions arise. How will security be guaranteed on a local, national, or global scale if these scales are connected not only through transnational networks but also through fused imagined communities that reject standard allegiances to a single nation-state? And what will this mean for the future for democracy, security, and the global order?

It is still too early to find definitive answers. This is precisely the task for further research. But as scholars and practitioners think about the ways that different nations are ‘managing’ this transition, and as they develop new strategies to confront insecurity in the modern world, there is value in remembering the basic root of the problem.

First, a wide variety of non-state armed actors are increasingly engaging in violence and thus challenging the state’s role in monopolizing the means of coercion. These changes both result from and drive the limited capacities of states to respond to citizen concerns, driving a vicious cycle of state de-legitimization and the appearance of alternative imagined communities of reciprocity, many of which are protected by their own non-state armed actors. Second, the non-state armed actors increasingly involved in violence in today’s world are not those necessarily struggling over state power or for political inclusion. A large number are motivated either by economic requisites or a desire for self-protection in a deteriorating security environment in which the state seems increasingly unwilling or incapable of doing so. Third, it is precisely these changes in the nature and origins of non-state armed action that create new forms of conflict over the monopolization of coercive capacity, in turn pitting state and non-state ‘imagined communities’ and their armed forces against each other.

The latter dynamic drives the use of violence by non-state armed actors who seek to defend their dominion, thus laying the groundwork for more conflict between and among non-state armed actors (both locally and transnationally). The result is often the forging of new compromises or complicities between state and non-state coercive

actors, with such relationships reinforcing a tendency toward oligopoly in the means of violence. These relationships also change the nature of the state by blurring the line between state and non-state actors, and by compromising the state's monopoly role as the guarantor of the rule of law, thereby limiting the state's capacity to enforce a pluralistic social contract where all are protected and included, not merely those who have access to protection or security.

Finally, to study these developments scholars must accommodate a more nuanced understanding of space and territorial dynamics, precisely because the new imagined communities that non-state armed actors defend, and the battles the state in turn is forced to engage in, are likely to exist in spatial orbits that are both smaller and larger than the nation-state, at times cross-cutting countries and regions to create new networks of obligation and reciprocity that can only be understood when the spatial correlates of their action and allegiance are spelled out. This, finally, may be the greatest security challenge for the nation-state: learning how to operate in new sub- and trans-national territorial domains, and determining whether existent institutions, political authority, and social legitimacy available to them now are ready for the 21st-century task that lies ahead. Such a task calls for creative new ways of strengthening states, of forging new citizen-state relations, and creating new institutions or flexible procedures that allow national states to legitimately struggle against non-state armed actors at a variety of scales simultaneously, both local and transnational. In the process, new state forms and new sovereignty arrangements will undoubtedly emerge, but hopefully in the context of peace and security rather than unrestrained armed force.

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