

Engaging Al Qaeda? Armed Groups, Information and Coercion

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**Presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Conference,
Saskatoon, SK, May 29-June 1, 2007.¹**

¹ A previous version of this paper was presented at the seminar on Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups convened by the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University in cooperation with the Graduate Institute of International Studies and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 9-10, 2007.

Summary

States are the primary political entities challenged by armed groups. States become legitimate in part by being able to maintain political stability within a given territory. If a state cannot effectively police its internal borders and prevent threats from armed groups, it loses legitimacy. States therefore normally seek to suppress armed groups within their territory. Some states will succeed in these efforts, others will fail. It is only when they fail that they will consider engaging armed groups politically.

Notwithstanding the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the expulsion of Al Qaeda from its base in Afghanistan, five years on the United States' war against Al Qaeda has reached a stalemate. Osama bin Laden remains at large, Al Qaeda has not been defeated, and there is growing speculation that the organization possibly cannot be defeated, at least in the near term. Opposition to the United States and support for Al Qaeda have both increased over the past several years. Moreover, Al Qaeda has learned how to disperse and survive in response to US military pressures, and it is arguably a more formidable adversary, and harder to annihilate, than in the past.

The stalemate against Al Qaeda has prompted two types of responses. The first deplores the distraction of Iraq and the dispersion of US national security attention away from the focus on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. This response argues that the current US approach, especially on Iraq, has multiplied the number of enemies poised against it, weakened its position in the world, and undermined its own citizens' security. The second type of response urges recognizing Al Qaeda as a rational actor with clear political demands, and calls for negotiations with the group over these. The argument here is that such political engagement offers more promise than a prolonged military standoff.

By contrast to both of these positions, we argue that Al Qaeda's dispersion needs to be taken more seriously as a political, military, organizational, and analytical challenge. Paradoxically, the same dispersal strategies that have allowed the center of Al Qaeda to survive by making it harder to target militarily, make it easier to bypass politically. In other words, the very adaptation that has led to the calls for talking to Al Qaeda - its flexibility and resilience - is also the strongest reason for not doing so at its center. Instead, engagement should take place at the periphery. Devolving engagement in this way requires disaggregating demands, evading global divides, and multiplying local and regional responses.

Understanding the organizational, political, and military challenges of engaging Al Qaeda will shed light on the more general challenge of engaging armed groups. Al Qaeda is not the exception to this challenge (a position implicitly shared by the advocates of military as well as political engagement of Al Qaeda at the center), but the latest, if most complicated, instance of it.

Seen this way, the conflict between Al Qaeda versus the United States and its allies begins to look less like a global clash between two formidable opponents, and more like a series of overlapping local, national, and regional conflicts with multiple players, some more connected than others. Similarly, Al Qaeda begins to look less like a single transnational terrorist organization capable of carrying out devastating attacks anywhere in the world, and more like a number of armed groups that are more or less allied to one another (and to some states), confronting and combating a number of states that are more or less allied with one another (as well as to some armed groups). These conflicts are more numerous than the single contest of the United States against Al Qaeda, but they are also possibly more amenable to resolution. This is because some of these armed groups may themselves be more willing to resolve their conflicts, and because we

are more familiar with the tools – security, military, political, humanitarian and economic – that can be applied locally, nationally, and regionally in such cases.

Building on this notion, the focus of our attentions should not be a single Al Qaeda center, albeit with many peripheries. It should be *multiple centers and peripheries*, with varying degrees of attachment to Al Qaeda and to Osama Bin Laden, and with varying degrees of commitments to political, ideological, or social projects espoused by different armed groups in each context. Each of these problems can and should be disentangled from the single divide between Islam and the West that the conflict with Al Qaeda suggests, and addressed autonomously, on its own terms. All of these challenges are familiar to us, not because we have always been successful in addressing them, but because we have dealt with them before in other parts of the globe. By dealing with the parts of the divide between Islam and the West (such as democratic transition, immigration, pluralism, and institution-building), we need not deny that there may be a whole to it as well. We need only deny that we know to what extent the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

In a decentralized organization the peripheries matter. Communicating directly with the ‘peripheries’ may help isolate and neutralize the center, and make it more amenable to political or humanitarian concessions, or perhaps even make it irrelevant. How an armed group runs itself will influence how to effectively engage it, irrespective of the means applied, whether coercive, humanitarian, economic, or political. The humanitarian community often engages armed groups under the premise that their engagement is an alternative to the use of force. While this may be true in some cases, in other situations soft and hard instruments (including the use of force) will be used at the same time, albeit likely by different actors. The challenge is to ensure that they are used in some sort of coherent fashion, by matching the ‘toolbox’ of different instruments with the ‘black box’ of different armed groups.

ENGAGING AL QAEDA? ARMED GROUPS, INFORMATION AND COERCION

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On September 11, 2001 Al Qaeda conducted an attack that ‘shocked and awed’ the United States. The US responded with a military attack on Al Qaeda at its center: Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It also pursued a further strategy of tightening the noose around Al Qaeda’s funding, arms supplies, recruitment, ideologues, and supporters. Notwithstanding the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the expulsion of Al Qaeda from its base in Afghanistan, five years on the US war against Al Qaeda has reached a stalemate.² Osama Bin Laden remains at large, Al Qaeda has not been defeated, and there is growing speculation that it possibly cannot be defeated, at least in the near term.

The stalemate against Al Qaeda has prompted two types of responses. The first deplors the distraction of Iraq and the dispersion of US national security attention away from the focus on Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. This response argues that the current US approach, especially on Iraq, has multiplied the number of enemies poised against it, weakened its position in the world, and undermined its own citizens’ security (by invading Iraq instead of focusing its military and intelligence apparatus on AQ). The second type of response urges recognizing Al Qaeda as a rational actor with clear political demands, and calls for negotiations with the group over these. The argument here is that such political engagement offers more promise than a prolonged military standoff.

While these responses appear to contradict each other, they share a common premise: both assume that the US (and its allies) should focus its attention primarily on Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, whether to defeat it by force or to bring the current hostilities to an end through political engagement. This paper challenges this assumption. The same factors that have allowed Al Qaeda to survive militarily and to bring the conflict to its current stalemate – namely, the group’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances by decentralizing its operations – essentially moot political engagement with it at the center. If the center of Al Qaeda has less control over its periphery, the focus of engagement should increasingly be on the periphery instead of on Bin Laden and the center.

We build on this claim about Al Qaeda to catalyze a discussion about the tools for engaging armed groups in general, including but not limited to Al Qaeda. By contrast to those who advocate military as well as political engagement of Al Qaeda at the center,

² In this paper, we do not explore the efficacy or wisdom of the decision to invade Iraq. Apart from a few diehards in the US administration, there is otherwise widespread consensus that the invasion has been a serious setback to the US fight against Al Qaeda.

we believe Al Qaeda is not the exception to the general challenge of engaging armed groups in the context of globalization. It is instead the latest, if most complicated, instance of it. Understanding the organizational, political, and military challenges of engaging Al Qaeda, we suggest, will shed light on the more general problem of the challenges of engaging armed groups.

The paper begins with a description of the stalemate between Al Qaeda and the United States, and the two broad responses that have been proposed to deal with it: fighting Al Qaeda more effectively versus talking to it. It then describes the rationale for shifting attention away from Osama Bin Laden and the center of Al Qaeda to the multiple groups and problems found at its periphery. Devolving engagement in this way requires disaggregating demands, evading global divides, and multiplying local and regional responses. The analysis next presents a framework for making sense of the 'black box' of how different armed groups organize themselves, by focusing on a fundamental problem that all groups face, namely how the center (or principal) organizes coercive force and monitors its peripheries (or agents) to ensure that they comply with its policies. Finally, we use this framework to link insights about how different armed groups are organized to the range of tools – from hard military ones to soft economic and political ones – available to states, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs in responding to armed groups.

Our aim is not to provide a manual for engaging diverse types of armed groups. Even if such a thing were possible, we currently know too little about the connections between different groups and instruments to make any authoritative claims in this regard. Instead, our aims are more modest: to suggest shifting attention from the center (of Al Qaeda) to the periphery, and to provide a rudimentary framework to begin to make sense of the sorts of groups and policies that we find there. Once we shift our focus in this way, engaging Al Qaeda becomes comparable to engaging other kinds of armed groups, regardless of how connected they may be to Al Qaeda itself.

Why do states talk to armed groups?

States are the primary, though not the only, political entities challenged by armed groups. States become legitimate in part by being able to maintain political stability within a given territory – what is commonly understood as acquiring the monopoly over the legitimate means of coercion (Weber 1973). The presence of armed groups in a state's territory or threatening the citizens and interests of a state calls into question the very rationale of a state as such (Poggi 1978; Tilly 1985, 1993; Mann 1993; Spruyt 1994, 1996; Ertman 1997; Krasner 1999). If a state cannot effectively police its internal borders and prevent threats from armed groups, it loses legitimacy. Moreover, because states mostly reject armed groups' legitimacy, they are unlikely to engage with them in any but coercive terms (through its military or police forces). Here it matters little whether the state is capitalist, socialist, liberal or authoritarian, or whether the armed group is rightist, leftist, nationalist or religious. All states normally seek to suppress armed groups within their territory. Some states will succeed in these efforts, others will fail. It

is only when they fail, that they will seriously consider the option of engaging armed groups in political dialogue.³

The Stalemate between Al Qaeda and the United States

After the attacks of September 11, 2001 the United States focused its massive military might on destroying Al Qaeda. It brought together an international coalition, secured United Nations support, and pursued Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The United States used its considerable diplomatic capital to align its allies, and even to mobilize its rivals in support of its international efforts against Al Qaeda. While the United States used diplomatic and political means, it did so in pursuit of clearly military objectives. Yet despite these unprecedented intelligence, security, financial, and diplomatic efforts on a global scale, Al Qaeda has survived, and Osama Bin Laden has yet to be captured.

The current US approach against Al Qaeda has reached a stalemate. Al Qaeda has adapted successfully to the changed circumstances (brought about by the closure of its base in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime) by decentralizing and dispersing its operations, permitting the hostilities against the US and its allies to continue.⁴ At the same time, the failures of the US war on Iraq – including the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the failure to build a post-Saddam Hussein order – have permitted the opposition against the US to continue, if not grow.

Two responses have been offered in this context. The first – which can be labeled ‘fight smarter’ – argues for getting military and counterinsurgency operations right. This involves pulling out of Iraq, and sharply refocusing American strategies and tactics toward the original objective of defeating Al Qaeda (e.g. Posen 2002, 2006; Mearsheimer and Walt 2003; Shultz, Farah, and Lochard 2004; Van Evera 2006). While this position has much to be said for it (and there can be no disagreement about its assessment of the current predicament or about its calls for a more intelligent use of military and diplomatic resources), its principal shortcoming is that it may be too late to implement. Opposition to the United States and support for Al Qaeda have both increased in the region over the past several years. Moreover, Al Qaeda has already learned how to disperse and survive in response to US military pressures, and it is arguably a more formidable adversary, and harder to annihilate, than in the past. To be sure, the possibility of a military defeat cannot be discounted outright (and the determination of whether it can or cannot be defeated are ultimately empirical questions beyond the scope of this essay), but it is not the only possible response to the current stalemate.

³ We attach no necessary moral position to this stance by states. Armed groups that have a self-proclaimed revolutionary and/or nationalist ideology will also first seek military engagement, before they explore political options. At the same time, precisely because states are the political actors most reluctant to engage with armed groups by non-military means, if a case can be made for states to do so, then a case can be made for other actors – including international and non-governmental organizations – to do so as well. As we suggest below, there are different types of engagement, including political, coercive, humanitarian, human rights, and developmental.

⁴ There has not been another attack by Al Qaeda on American territory during these past five years, though there have been Al Qaeda-related attacks against US allies, including Britain, Spain, and Australia/Indonesia (in Bali).

The second existing response also recognizes Al Qaeda as a formidable adversary, yet it comes to the opposite conclusion than the 'fight smarter' option. It reasons that because Al Qaeda eschews the framework of traditional military conflict, and because it has decentralized its operational structure, it will be very difficult to defeat militarily. Instead of a more intense military approach, this view (which might be labeled 'talk to them') argues for engaging Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden politically (Mohamedou 2005). Contrary to common dismissals of it as an irrational and apocalyptic death cult that cannot be engaged, this view argues that Al Qaeda is a rational actor with clear political demands that it has articulated on repeated occasions.⁵ (These demands boil down to ending the US presence in the Middle East, its support for Israel's occupation of Palestine, and its sponsorship of corrupt regimes in the region.) This position suggests that if some of its grievances were met, Al Qaeda would likely cease its hostilities against the United States and other Western powers. The alternative – continuing the current course of action focusing on military defeat – will perpetuate this conflict indefinitely.

What should we make of these contradictory alternatives? The 'fight smarter' option, as suggested above, ignores the increased difficulty of military operations against a durable Al Qaeda that has adapted successfully to attacks against it. (The oft-repeated axiom that an insurgent wins if it does not lose, and that a state loses if it does not win, applies in spades in this context.) The 'talk to them' option suffers from a different problem. Let us set aside the possible (and not inconsiderable) political obstacles to granting Al Qaeda the concessions necessary for ending its hostilities. (These obstacles involve, among others, the United States' demand for oil, the difficulty in reforming entrenched authoritarian regimes in the region, and the pro-Israeli lobby in the US.) Even without these obstacles, there is an organizational problem that must be considered. The very strategy that Al Qaeda has used to survive – namely, disperse, diversify, and devolve – complicates its internal command and control operations. It is not clear that under the new circumstances, where the Al Qaeda center has devolved so much power to its periphery, the center could deliver the periphery even if it were engaged to do so.

Curiously, while both the 'fight smarter' and the 'talk to them' positions may share the view of Al Qaeda as a much more diffusely networked organization, the success of their approach rests on Al Qaeda remaining a single entity, capable of commanding and controlling most of its peripheries. By contrast to both of these positions, we argue that we need to take Al Qaeda's dispersion more seriously as a political, military, organizational and analytical challenge.⁶ Paradoxically, the same dispersal strategies that have allowed the center of Al Qaeda to survive by making it harder to target militarily, make it easier to ignore politically. In other words, the very adaptation that

⁵ See also Lawrence 2005.

⁶ Abbott, Rogers and Sloboda suggest a stronger version of our claim, arguing that "'Al-Qaida', if it ever really existed as most people understand it, did not survive past the end of 2001. The individuals and groups so often called al-Qaida today may actually have very few substantial links to bin Laden; they merely follow similar precepts and methods – acting autonomously, but in the 'style' of al-Qaida that bin Laden now personifies" (2006, 19). While we do not know whether Al Qaeda has ceased to exist altogether as an organization, its dispersion makes its center – at the very least – far less relevant than before.

has led to the calls for talking to Al Qaeda – its flexibility and persistence – is also the strongest reason for not doing so. As the relationship between the group’s center and its peripheries becomes less vertical and more horizontal, efforts to engage it at the center become less relevant, while efforts to engage its periphery become more so.⁷

Seen this way, the conflict between Al Qaeda versus the United States and its allies begins to look less like a global clash between two formidable, even if asymmetrical, opponents, and more like a series of overlapping local, national, and regional conflicts with multiple players, some more connected than others. Similarly, Al Qaeda begins to look less like a single “transnational” terrorist organization capable of carrying out devastating attacks anywhere in the world, and more like a number of armed groups that are more or less allied to one another (and to some states), confronting and combating a number of states that are more or less allied with one another (as well as to some armed groups). These conflicts are more numerous than the single contest of the US against Al Qaeda, but they are also possibly more amenable to resolution, in part because some of these armed groups may be more willing to negotiate, and because we are more familiar with the tools – security, military, political, humanitarian and economic – that can be used to engage them locally, nationally and regionally.

In other words, the focus of our attentions should not be a single Al Qaeda center, albeit with many peripheries. It should be a network of multiple centers and peripheries, with varying degrees of attachment to Al Qaeda and to Osama Bin Laden, and with varying degrees of commitments to political, ideological, or social projects espoused by Al Qaeda in each of their contexts. Each of these problems can and should be disengaged from the single divide between Islam and the West that the conflict with Al Qaeda suggests, and addressed autonomously, on their own terms.

Two broad sets of distinctions are useful for this purpose:

Horizontal Distinctions

The first is to show how particular conflicts seen as sites of political and ideological contestation on a global scale could be recast as conflicts with their own dynamics that require a particular set of solutions (cf. Manikkalingam 2006). This entails resisting the pressure to choose sides in the divide between the West and Islam; and thus refusing to fight it out politically, ideologically, and militarily, in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Europe, among many other places, as sites of great contestation between these two competing value systems. Instead, we argue that without engaging in the debate about whether or not there is a global divide, it is possible to tackle each problem in each of these areas (and others) separately.

In this sense, Iraq then becomes less a place where the best of the West is contesting the worst of Islamic radicalism, than a country undergoing a triple transition – from

⁷ Kalyvas (2003, 2007) argues that peripheries matter in all civil conflicts, even those where the parties have not decentralized and dispersed. For an older view of the importance of local conflicts and dynamics, see Scott (1985).

Saddam Hussein's Baath party dictatorship to multiparty democracy, from a Sunni dominated state to a multiethnic one, and from US occupation to self-government. Addressing each of these transitions has less to do with where we stand on the Islam-West divide, than with the techniques we can use to address each of these challenges and the lessons we have learned from other places that can help us do so.

Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian problem becomes a challenge of ending the occupation of a people, and installing a functioning democracy to permit them to govern themselves, while developing a viable economy that will sustain their lives. It is not a place where an outpost of the West is facing Islamic hostility. Saudi Arabia can be viewed as the challenge of transitioning from a theocratic kingdom to a more plural state. Also, under this prism, Afghanistan concerns the challenge of restoring basic institutions that can function in a country that has been ravaged by war and flattened by bombs for more than twenty-five years. Syria and Egypt are by contrast comparatively more straightforward, requiring essentially a process for electing a representative government. The issue of Islam in Europe is ultimately about including marginalized immigrant communities who first came as guest workers – but who now feel that they are neither guests nor workers – into the socioeconomic and political mainstream of a number of countries.

All of these challenges are familiar to us, not because we have always been successful in addressing them (we have not), but because we have dealt with them before in other parts of the globe. By dealing with the parts of the divide between Islam and the West (such as democratic transition, immigration, pluralism, and institution-building), we need not deny that there may also be a whole. We need only deny that we know to what extent the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. There is not one global divide between Islam and West (or between their purported interlocutors, Al Qaeda and the United States), where sides are chosen and concessions made among these two competing agendas across a number of cases. Instead, there are a number of political, military, and humanitarian challenges in different places, which should be addressed as such. And, it is not always necessary to address the whole in order to tackle each part.

Vertical Distinctions

We cannot assume that even the groups at the Al Qaeda periphery necessarily share the center's intentions and agenda. A number of groups are affiliated with Al Qaeda to different degrees, but even these have their own dynamics and agendas, with often little connection to the center. For example, groups like the Abu Sayyaf (which appears motivated by combination of clan warfare and kidnapping for money), the Taliban (fighting against NATO occupation and for Islamic codes), and the Al Qaeda groups in Iraq, all have very different agendas and structures, which are not always or necessarily determined by Osama Bin Laden and the Al Qaeda center.

We do not deny that these groups may be interconnected and share similar goals across a range of different locations, and even technical skills in terrorism and guerilla warfare. We do not know the extent to which they do. Yet notwithstanding these connections, in each case the local parts are sufficiently important to be worth tackling on their own

terms. Furthermore, communicating directly with these ‘peripheries’ may help isolate and neutralize the center, and make it more amenable to political or humanitarian concessions, or perhaps even make it irrelevant. Instead of a framework for engaging (or militarily defeating) Al Qaeda at the center, we need a framework for making sense of the range of different armed groups encountered not only at the Al Qaeda periphery, but also beyond. The sections below present, respectively, a rudimentary sketch of such a framework, and how it might be applied.

Monitoring and engaging armed groups

The increasingly wide acknowledgement of a stalemate with Al Qaeda presents an opportunity to rethink how to engage armed groups. Without pretending to offer a ‘how to’ manual for engaging Al Qaeda, or indeed any other armed group, this section presents a rudimentary framework for thinking about how to approach this problem.

We make three claims. First, it is necessary to unpack the ‘black box’ of armed groups as a category, and to distinguish among different kinds of groups, as well the relationships between the center and the periphery of Al Qaeda. Second, notwithstanding the asymmetries of the state-centric system, states and other actors already have a ‘toolbox’ of instruments to engage armed groups, ranging from soft instruments such as dialogue and persuasion, to harder instruments involving sanctions and – at the limit – coercive force. Third, we propose that the central challenge to focus on is matching the black box of armed groups to the tool box of instruments. We take up each of these issues in turn, and conclude with what we take to be a number of remaining questions and unresolved problems.

Types of Groups

Not all armed groups, just like not all states, are alike. In this section we focus on some internal organizational differences among groups (especially pertaining to command and control). This is critical because how an armed group runs itself will influence how to effectively engage it, irrespective of the means applied, whether coercive, humanitarian, economic, or political. Some groups have clear hierarchies and others operate as loosely-connected networks. Groups also provide different sorts of motivations and incentives for their cadre. Weinstein (2007 and forthcoming) argues that some are driven by strong ideology, while others provide strictly material incentives for their members. Some groups also seek to represent a particular constituency, and provide them with clear ‘public’ goods (such as security and well-being) while others are much more predatory, with little if any representative capabilities (Reno 1998, 2002). At the same time, warfare itself is an important – and often ignored – variable. Some groups engage in highly conventional warfare, with frontlines and set-piece battles; others engage in much more unconventional guerrilla warfare, with hit-and-run tactics, no frontlines, and often very ambiguous distinctions between combatants and civilians; still others engage in both (Kalyvas 2005, 2006).

Policzer (2006) has suggested distinguishing coercive organizations (including armed groups as well as states) according to how their leaders monitor the operations of their agents on the ground.⁸ It is not possible for leaders to know all of their agents' activities all the time. Consequently, leaders rely on other ways to gather information on their agents. One is through internal monitoring (IM), where information is gathered from within the leader's own organization.⁹ Another way is through external monitoring (EM), which involves information that comes from sources outside the direct control of the leader or ruler. For example, rulers in some cases gather information about their agents directly from the population at large, through special audiences or other mechanisms. In other cases, independent organizations outside the direct control of the executive or leader carry out external monitoring.¹⁰ These can include organizations such as human rights commissions, ombudspersons, congressional committees, courts, or special panels, so long as these remain truly independent of the leader's control.

Internal and external monitoring are not mutually exclusive information-gathering strategies, and it is possible to have different combinations of the two. Indeed, many organizations and regimes rely on such combinations.¹¹ Plotting degrees of internal and external monitoring along vertical and horizontal axes yields a typology of how coercion is organized across different cases (see Table 1).

Where internal monitoring is high and external monitoring is low, leaders know a great deal about the operations of coercive agents, but those outside the top executive leadership know very little. This space is labeled "bureaucratic coercion," to denote the monopolization of information at the top of the leadership hierarchy, and the complexity of organization required to gather and process information.¹²

By contrast, "blind coercion" exists where neither the leadership nor any other group is very informed about the activities of the coercive agents. There is unlikely to be much of

⁸ While this is not the only possible distinction (as suggested above), there are several reasons to consider it. First, information is central to running any organization (e.g. Coase 1937; Williamson 1975; McCubbins and Weingast 1984; Stinchcombe 1990; Krehbiel 1991; Williamson 1996; Brown *et al.* 2000). Coercive organizations (including armed groups as well as states) are in this sense no different from other organizations such as interest groups, parties, or bureaucracies. Second, it is possible to gauge how well different organizations process information, using various proxies for the depth and breadth of information (Policzer 2001). Third, such information has significant consequences for how organizations operate. Organizations that are good information processors behave differently than those that are not. By contrast, other factors are not as universally applicable. For example, ideology is more of a factor in some organizations than others, and it is hard to measure. By contrast, a group's size can be easily measured, but is not necessarily significant.

⁹ Leaders can carry out internal monitoring themselves by personally observing agents' behavior, requesting reports, or directly overseeing whether agents' actions comply with the goals of the organization. Or they can assign specialized internal monitors to gather information on the leader's behalf.

¹⁰ The main criterion that makes this monitoring 'external' is that the information generated comes from outside the given organization. IM and EM correspond roughly to what McCubbins and Weingast (1984) label "police patrol" and "fire alarm" monitoring.

¹¹ Moreover, these combinations might change over time, for example, as leaders deliberately impose stricter or looser internal controls, or as outsiders demand — and obtain — more oversight (see Policzer 2001, 2006).

¹² Many dictatorships, including the USSR, Nazi Germany, or the German Democratic Republic, would fall into this category.

a formal organization in blind coercion, and if there is one, it is likely to be ineffective. Agents in blind coercion operate with neither internal supervision nor the expectation of accountability to outside groups.¹³ Diametrically opposite is “transparent coercion,” where the executive leadership, as well as other institutions and groups, have a great deal of information about the operations of the coercive agents. In transparent coercion, information comes not just from one organization but from many, and operations take place in a fishbowl: a large number of actors and institutions can oversee what coercive agents do.¹⁴

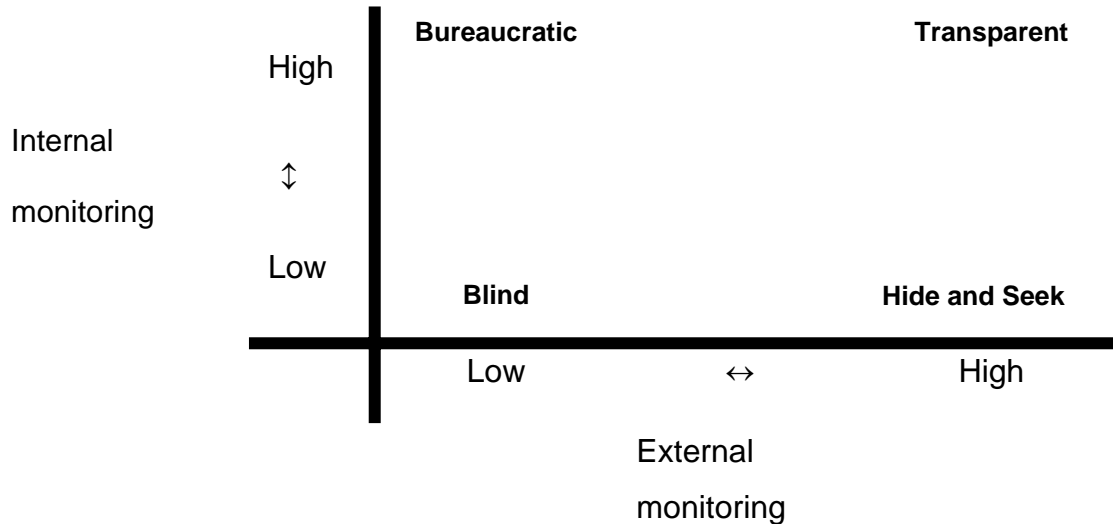
Finally, in cases where external monitoring is high and internal monitoring is low, information on coercive agents is widely available to different groups, but not particularly deep. No one is likely to know very much about the precise details of the operations themselves, given that there is little or no direct oversight. Indeed, the leaders in these cases may deliberately not want to exercise very much oversight, for example if their agents are carrying out controversial missions, or ones likely to carry a high political cost. In these cases, leaders check whether operations have achieved the desired results by learning about them only from outsiders’ reports, for example in the media. More detailed information (such as the identities of the agents, or their precise *modus operandi*) is harder to obtain. Indeed, coercive agents and external monitoring sources are likely to engage in a type of game: where the former try to hide their actions and the latter try to find out what happened. This space can therefore be labeled “hide and seek coercion.”¹⁵ Table 1 illustrates the different types of coercion:

¹³ State coercion in places such as present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, and to a lesser extent Argentina during the military dictatorship (1976-82) would be examples of blind coercion.

¹⁴ Coercive practices undertaken by the police and armed forces in advanced democracies such as the United Kingdom, Sweden or Canada are examples of more or less transparent coercion.

¹⁵ An example is the Anti-terrorist Liberation Groups (GAL) squads that the Spanish government organized in the 1980s to crack down on the Basque terrorist group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) (e.g. BBC 1998a, b). The GAL were given wide latitude, with minimal reporting requirements, yet they operated in the context of a liberal democratic regime with institutions such as a free press and independent judiciary. Eventually, these external monitors’ reports on the GAL’s operations – and abuses – provoked a political crisis that led to the downfall of Spain’s Socialist government.

Table 1
Types of Coercion



There are costs and benefits to leaders who pursue different types of coercion. For example, bureaucratic coercion presents obvious advantages, particularly to rulers. With high internal monitoring, leaders trust their agents. An organization in this space acts with a relatively high unity of purpose. Agents are expected to follow orders, and transgressions are reported (and punished internally). Corruption is usually low, and it comparatively easier to coordinate activities within the organization's branches or with other institutions. Moreover, because of the low level of external monitoring, a ruler in this kind of organization need not worry about independent power centers which might challenge his rule.

However, there are also costs and dangers for leaders who pursue the bureaucratic coercion path. The principal ones are expense and risk. A large amount of resources is required to build and maintain a complex organization, which not all leaders are able to raise. Moreover, a complex organization of this kind exposes a leader to the risk of having the members gain in power and turn against him. Also, if principals are informed clearly of their agents' actions, they are more likely to be held accountable for them. This may be risky for leaders who want to avoid being tainted by agents' misdeeds. Any leader will want to evaluate whether - all things being equal - the benefits of creating such an organization outweigh the costs.¹⁶

¹⁶ Additionally, bureaucratic coercion does not always guarantee that leaders will receive precise and reliable information on agents' operations. The reason is that when the penalties for transgressing the leadership's policies are high, agents have strong disincentives to report accurately on their operations when these are not strictly in line with policy, or when they make mistakes. Leaders have two options in facing this dilemma. They can impose even stricter penalties for transgression and create yet more internal

Transparent coercion offers a different set of tradeoffs. On the one hand, principals do not need to rely on only one monitor to gather information on their agents' operations. The multiplicity of monitors provides a wealth of information, allowing principals to check different sources against each other. On the other hand, transparent coercion may provide *too much* information. Different monitors may use different standards, measures, and evidence, resulting in confusion or overload. In addition, transparent coercion requires respecting different organizations' independence, meaning that rulers will necessarily face more constraints on their own actions.¹⁷

Blind coercion, with minimal internal and external monitoring, yields a diametrically opposite set of tradeoffs. Here, leaders do not need to accept limitations on their power from external sources, nor will they be overloaded by the din of competing and contradictory information of transparent coercion. Instead, they are unlikely to receive very much information on their agents' operations from *any* source, internal or external. This sort of ignorance may be useful for leaders who do not want to know what their agents are doing, especially if they are carrying out politically sensitive or costly operations.¹⁸ Moreover, blind coercion offers the added incentive of being relatively quick and cheap to set up, because it does not require the complex institutions associated with high levels of internal monitoring.

Yet because coordinating inter- and even intra-branch activities is difficult in blind coercion, it is unsuitable when such coordination is important. In addition, agents are likely deviate from their organization's task and engage in corruption and coercion for their own purposes in blind coercion. With neither internal nor external monitoring as a check, it is hard to imagine how leaders may effectively prevent this, or even to know

monitoring mechanisms, or they can tolerate independent monitors, such as media or watchdog groups. Under the first option, leaders do not have to deal with the risk of independent institutions that can potentially mobilize against them. However, the primary disadvantage is that layering punishments and internal monitoring institutions on top of one another does not fundamentally resolve the problem of obtaining accurate information on agents' operations. It merely transposes the problem from one level to another. For example, a principal P can monitor the behavior of agent A by tasking agent B to do so. So long as agent B is under P's control, it has the same incentives to distort its reports as A does. Agent C can monitor B's operations (or D can monitor C's, etc.), but if it is also under P's control, the problem remains. At some point, the costs of maintaining such a cumbersome apparatus will begin to outweigh the benefits, or the organization's ability to pay for it. Alternatively, as suggested by Weinstein (2007), these organizations might address the problems of internal monitoring by imposing rigorous mechanisms to control recruitment in the first place. In other words, bureaucratic coercion organizations are likely to have very strong distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and to select insiders carefully (for example according to ideology). Although see Arjona and Kalyvas (2006), for evidence that even non-ideological groups (such as Colombian paramilitaries) can also be disciplined in their internal structure. In all these cases, however, discipline is obtained at a cost, including internal monitoring.

¹⁷ Rulers who already operate in this context (for example in a democratic system accustomed to respecting courts, presses, and other independent monitors) may simply assume these costs as a given, without questioning them. However, a leader who wants to maximize his power and minimize the power of other institutions either inside or outside the state is likely to limit the degree of external monitoring as much as possible.

¹⁸ Plausible deniability is one benefit of not having too much information on agents' operations. For insightful discussions of death squads as organizations that permit "murder with deniability," see Brenner and Campbell, eds. (2000), and Ron (2003).

much about it. Moreover, because of the difficulties in maintaining control and imposing uniform policies, in this kind of organization discipline is likely to be low and the distinctions between insiders and outsiders are likely to be blurry and hard to maintain.¹⁹

Hide and seek coercion provides yet another set of tradeoffs. Here, a leader may deliberately want to avoid direct and detailed internal knowledge of his agents' operations. Only vague general orders might be given, and the leader may be interested only in whether or not the task is accomplished, e.g. whether the intended targets are killed. This kind of report can be provided reasonably effectively by external monitors, for example in the media. However, even though hide and seek coercion provides a leader with more information (through external monitoring reports), coordination of agents may remain as difficult as in blind coercion.

As suggested above, this is not the only way to distinguish among coercive organizations. Yet because all organizations – including armed groups – have to monitor their agents, this is a useful framework to make sense of at least some significant differences among them. In the following sub-section we discuss the range of instruments available to engage armed groups, and suggest possible links to the different types of groups we have discussed.

Toolbox

Notwithstanding the many asymmetries between states and non-state groups in an international order in which the state remains the basic legal and political unit, international and domestic actors have a 'tool box' at their disposal to engage armed groups in different ways, for political, humanitarian, coercive or other purposes.

These instruments can be understood along a spectrum.²⁰ At one end, there are the 'soft' instruments of dialogue, persuasion, and education. Such direct contact and negotiation can have many purposes. States often engage non-state armed groups for political purposes, to establish dialogue to resolve particular problems or coordinate activities. Notwithstanding the state-centric international system – and states' common protestations against "talking to terrorists" – such direct engagements are a common part of most conflicts. NGOs (not bound by the same political restrictions as states) also use dialogue and persuasion to engage armed groups. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has made education campaigns a central aspect of its efforts to persuade armed actors (including states as well as non-state armed groups) to comply or improve their compliance with the core terms of international humanitarian law.

¹⁹ For example, while it was an armed group, the RUF in Sierra Leone can be described as a blind coercion organization. It operated with minimal levels of both internal and external monitoring, and the top leadership was able to exercise only minimal control over its cadre. Indeed, in many cases it is difficult to know exactly whom the cadre consisted of (cf. Richards 1996, 34-104; Reno 1998, 123-24; Keen 2000, 35-36).

²⁰ This section draws on Capie and Policzer (forthcoming), and especially on Weinstein (in Policzer and Capie). See also Hofmann 2006.

Moving away from the 'soft' end of the spectrum are instruments that offer armed groups opportunities to bind themselves to particular agreements, and to demonstrate their willingness and capacity to meet these commitments.²¹ States themselves often do this, as they negotiate agreements with armed groups to cease fire, to ease the burdens of some of the worst aspects of conflicts (for example on civilians), coordinate prisoner exchanges, or bring conflicts to an end.

An example of this kind of approach is the Swiss NGO Geneva Call's (GC) "Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation in Mine Action" (DC). This instrument is rooted in the fact that the Ottawa Convention against anti-personnel mines by definition does not permit non-state groups to sign on to it. Geneva Call engages armed groups to persuade them to sign an alternative: the DC is essentially a public promise by the group in question that it will either stop or refrain from using landmines, and (usually) collaborate in different forms of mine removal activities. GC has been in operation since 2000, and to date thirty-one groups (seventeen from Somalia alone) have signed the DC.²² These deeds have no legal status in international or domestic law, but they serve as a benchmark to hold the group to its promise.

A harder kind of instrument is 'naming and shaming,' arguably the central advocacy tool of the human rights movement. This approach involves publicizing abuses committed by different armed actors. Unlike the previous instruments, this does not require direct contact with the group in question. (Though such contacts often occur, of course, e.g. for lobbying purposes or to obtain information about particular cases.) Although widely used by human rights organizations versus states as well as non-state armed groups, naming and shaming is likely to be more effective against organizations that care about their reputations.²³

Sanctions of various sorts are another kind of policy instrument, somewhat closer to the "harder" end of the spectrum. Numerous types of economic and political sanctions have been applied against particular armed groups (such as freezing their assets, restricting their members' travel, or their ability to purchase weapons). More indirect sanctions include restrictions on the purchase of otherwise legal commodities (such as diamonds

²¹ Sassòli (2006) argues that creating these opportunities should be a central focus of international policy pertaining to armed groups.

²² See <http://www.genevacall.org/>.

²³ Unfortunately, notwithstanding the fact that they have changed their definition of what constitutes a human rights violation to encompass acts committed by states as well as by non-state groups, the principal international human rights organizations (Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) have still tended to focus their attention mostly on violations by states. Even though non-state armed groups are central actors in modern conflicts, states appear (still) to be the central focus of human rights organizations' reporting (Petrasek, in Capie and Policzer). Furthermore, findings in social psychology indicate that people who are shamed are more, rather than less likely to commit acts of violence (e.g. Nathanson 1992; Tangney et al. 1992, 1996; Gilligan 2003; and Nyquist Potter 2006). The human rights movement has taken little stock of such possibilities, assuming naming and shaming as their basic tool without developing a coherent theory as to how it is meant to work. (We are grateful to David Petrasek for drawing our attention to this literature.)

or other minerals) associated with conflict areas (e.g. LeBillon 2001, 2003). While there have been some successes (such as the sanctions against UNITA in Angola), Weinstein points out that the “record of commodity sanctions in the 1990s is mixed at best. In most cases, the conflicts were resolved with outside military intervention, rather than as a result of the collapse of a group targeted by the sanctions regime” (in Capie and Policzer, *ibid.*).

Legal sanctions are an even harder instrument. While numerous gaps no doubt remain, international law has made great advances in terms of incorporating armed groups within it. These advances include reforming the Geneva Conventions to encompass intra-state as well as inter-state conflicts, extending the use of domestic law in the direction of universal jurisdiction to encompass acts committed by armed actors beyond a given state’s borders, and creating a number of new institutions, such as the International Criminal Court, as well as the special tribunals set up for the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Yugoslavian conflicts, among others (cf. Andreopoulos et al. 1997, forthcoming; Zegveld 2002; Sriram 2004, 2005; Sassòli 2006; Clapham 2006).

The ‘hardest’ instrument available to engage armed groups, or any other coercive organization, is the use of force. This involves a range of activities, from making arrests and conducting interrogations (functions often, though not always, carried out by police forces) to killing opponents in battle (normally carried out by armed forces in warfare). While a full discussion of the use of force is beyond the scope of this paper, we point out the following: while the failure to eliminate Al Qaeda by force has led some, at least, to suggest engaging it politically, such engagement is unlikely to take place in the absence of the use – or threat – of force in some way. Put another way, the humanitarian community often engages armed groups under the premise that engagement is an alternative to force. While this may be true in some cases, in others soft and hard instruments (including the use of force) will be used at the same time, albeit perhaps by different actors. The challenge is to ensure that they are used in coherent fashion. In the next section, we discuss how matching instruments to groups may potentially facilitate such coherence. Our discussion is not exhaustive; the aim is not to provide a map of all contingencies, but rather to suggest some possible opportunities and pitfalls.

Groups and instruments

Our challenge is to match the ‘toolbox’ of different instruments with the ‘black box’ of different armed groups. Some instruments may work on some groups, but have little effect on others. For example, we suggested above that naming and shaming may work better against groups that care about their reputation (for example because they have clear constituencies that they appeal to) than against those that do not. Pursuing the distinctions between internal and external monitoring also suggests further possibilities. In zones of conflict there is unlikely to be much external monitoring, though in some cases there is some, for example in the form of an independent press or other organizations dedicated to humanitarian, development or conflict resolution efforts. But there is likely to be a great deal of variation in terms of internal monitoring. Some armed groups no doubt operate according to clear hierarchies, where principals issue

commands and agents follow them. In other words, bureaucratic coercion organizations are likely to be prevalent in zones of conflict, especially in those, such as Iraq or Afghanistan, where they are matched against powerful states as adversaries.

While such organizations may be powerful adversaries in combat, they also present the opportunity for other forms of engagement. In bureaucratic coercion, groups are more likely to follow through with agreements made at the top, insofar as principals usually have a reasonable expectation that agents will follow orders. This means that it is possible to deal strictly with the top leadership, instead of with a multiplicity of actors. Indeed, outsiders (such as states or other organizations engaging the group in question) will likely share an interest with the principal in monitoring the activities of the agents. Building some kind of monitoring and follow-up mechanism may be an effective component of any kind of engagement or agreement with these groups. Naming and shaming in these cases (whether conducted by states or by independent human rights monitors) may, paradoxically, also fit with the principal's interests in monitoring his agents.²⁴ As a flip side, if the top leadership is not interested in engagement, it is unlikely that directly engaging the agents will be possible, let alone offer any results.²⁵

With respect to blind coercion organizations, outsiders may find common interest with principals in building internal monitoring capacity. For example, capacity-building (provided by organizations such as the ICRC or others) for the purpose of establishing clearer command and control lines and the required monitoring mechanisms to run them may be an effective component of any kind of engagement in these cases.

Being able to establish direct chains of command and control permits holding principals accountable for the actions of their agents. Instruments such as sanctions are therefore likely to be more effective against bureaucratic coercion groups, which have clear hierarchies. By contrast, where internal monitoring is low, establishing such accountability is harder. As suggested above, this kind of arm's length relationship is one of the benefits of low internal monitoring, for principals that do not want to be associated with the misdeeds of their agents.²⁶

On the other hand, while the low internal monitoring of blind coercion makes accountability difficult, such organizations are unlikely to be militarily effective against powerful bureaucratic coercion opponents. Blind coercion has appeared in cases such as Sierra Leone's civil war (where the RUF might have been characterized in this way), but it is less likely in the context of Iraq or Afghanistan, where there are severe pressures (in the form of powerful international military forces) selecting against such groups.

²⁴ Even though monitors and principals may disagree over a great deal, principals in bureaucratic coercion may be very interested in watchdogs' reports on their agents, especially if these reveal that agents are not following orders or procedures (Rosberg 1994, Policzer 2001).

²⁵ The limited success in persuading a group such as the FARC in Colombia to curb the use of landmines or child soldiers, for example, suggests that where the top leadership is uninterested in engagement, neither is the rest of the organization.

²⁶ Although it has not been around for a long time, and it does not have universal jurisdiction, the International Criminal Court offers a way around the problem of group responsibility, given that criminal liability is placed at the level of the individual and not the group.

Transparent coercion is unlikely in areas of conflict, we have suggested, because they lack the full array of effective institutions common to functioning democracies that permit this. Yet it is nevertheless worth considering what happens along the external monitoring dimension in these areas. Take Geneva Call's use of the Deed of Commitment. No doubt, questions can be asked about the effectiveness of this informal instrument in achieving its desired ends, and about one (relatively small) NGO's ability to hold signatory groups to their stated commitments. Some groups might sign with little intention or capacity to follow through on their promise to refrain from landmine use.²⁷ Additionally, it may be difficult for Geneva Call alone to verify, let alone enforce, compliance.²⁸

Notwithstanding these questions and challenges, we would suggest that the value of the Geneva Call model lies in its — perhaps as yet untested — potential as an external monitoring benchmark. Even if Geneva Call itself lacks the capacity to monitor compliance in all cases, there is no reason why other organizations may not do so in addition to or instead of Geneva Call. As a public declaration, the “Deed of Commitment” provides a benchmark that any external monitor can in principle hold the group to. Moreover, other NGOs or states could adopt similar benchmarking strategies, on the land mine or on any other issue.²⁹ In the human rights field, many international and domestic organizations compete with each other to monitor human rights violations. The result is sometimes chaotic and contradictory.³⁰ Yet although many gaps remain (and many powerful actors resist basic aspects of the human rights standards in the first place), these gaps are arguably smaller than before.³¹

What about Al Qaeda?

We have spoken so far in largely theoretical terms about the relationship between different groups and instruments. In this sub-section, we speculate on how this framework might offer some insights about Al Qaeda.

²⁷ It is worth noting that this is not simply a problem of armed groups. Many states -- including those with an otherwise good international reputation -- are in the same position. In Canada, the government of Jean Chrétien (which left office in 2004), is now widely acknowledged to have signed the Kyoto accord with the clear intention of not following through on it.

²⁸ Geneva Call is well aware of its limited capacity, and “recognizes that the commitments made by NSAs [Non-State Actors] take time to implement and that monitoring can, in some cases, be challenging” www.genevacall.org/faq/faq.htm.

²⁹ This point is also made by Sassòli (2006), who suggests that the international community should provide armed groups with as many opportunities to bind themselves to humanitarian norms as possible.

³⁰ For example, in the ongoing debate over how narrowly or broadly the ‘package’ of human rights obligations should be understood.

³¹ This is a necessarily speculative point, but it based on two observations. The first (made by the *Human Security Report* of 2005 and elsewhere) is that gross human rights violations have generally declined, as have overall deaths from violent conflict. The second is that there are more democracies today than in the past, and that democracies usually (though not always) come with the kind of stronger civil society that is a prerequisite of external monitoring.

From the perspective of the framework presented in this paper, Al Qaeda is a limiting case, insofar as it combines different kinds of organizational forms, and has adapted from one to another. Very likely, the organization immediately under Osama Bin Laden's control (at least before the American invasion of Afghanistan) is (or was) a classic "bureaucratic coercion" organization, with high levels of internal monitoring and relatively low levels of external monitoring. This organization, however, today appears to have looser kinds of relationships with other, relatively independent organizational agents elsewhere.³² The center of Al Qaeda might have very little internal monitoring information about the operational details of each cell or agent in its periphery, allowing them to operate with a maximum of stealth and flexibility. This kind of operational structure provides significant benefits, not the least of which is that it is flexible and hard for outsiders to scrutinize, and it has proven very difficult to defeat militarily.

Paradoxically, as we have argued above, this flexibility may have made Osama Bin Laden and the center of Al Qaeda less significant than in the past. While Al Qaeda's resilience and survival make engaging it necessary, it is not at all clear whether engaging the organization's top leadership would serve much purpose. Whether they would be able to deliver on any commitment – by being able to provide results in places not under their direct control – remains an open question.³³ Instead, 'engaging Al Qaeda' likely requires engaging a wide range of different types of armed groups, operating across a number of different places, often with diverse – and even contradictory – agendas.³⁴

In approaching these groups, the distinctions sketched above – among internal and external monitoring, and among different kinds of instruments – may be usefully applied. Some of these groups operate in contexts like Iraq and Afghanistan, where there are unlikely to be high levels of external monitoring. Others, however, operate in 'hide-and-seek' fashion in open societies (such as North America and Western Europe) with free presses and working independent judicial systems. In such cases, a range of other external monitoring institutions beyond the examples we have sketched in this paper may work to track information on the different groups' operations, membership, and support.

³² This is consistent with various analyses that describe Al Qaeda as having shifted from a single hierarchical structure to a more loosely-connected network of organizations (e.g. Mohamedou 2005; Abbott, Rogers and Sloboda 2006).

³³ In 2006, the CIA closed Alec Station, its principal unit for "hunting Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants." Reports indicate that the closure "reflects a view that Al Qaeda is no longer as hierarchical as it once was, ... and a growing concern about Qaeda-inspired groups that have begun carrying out attacks independent of Mr. bin Laden and his top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri" (Mazetti 2006). Other recent reports, however, suggest that Al Qaeda may have regrouped, and begun to once again create a more hierarchical form of organization (BBC 2006).

³⁴ We do not reject the possibility that there might be some political or world opinion benefit for the United States, for example, to be seen to be engaging Al Qaeda or, at least its political demands, and appear less belligerent. (There will of course be costs as well.) We only say that such 'talking at' Al Qaeda in the hope that others watching will shift allegiance is different from the approach of 'talking to' Al Qaeda in hopes that Al Qaeda itself will be able to deliver its peripheries. (We thank Brian Burgoon for pointing out this distinction.)

Conclusions

The calls for talking to Al Qaeda emerge because the group survives and continues to pose a threat. Al Qaeda has survived through its ability to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances, and by dispersing its operations after being forced to dismantle its base in Afghanistan. The paradox is that the reasons for talking to Al Qaeda are exactly the same reasons for not talking to its center: the organization has survived by making the notion of a center increasingly irrelevant. Therefore, engaging Al Qaeda means engaging a wide range of dispersed and decentralized groups and agents, with different structures and goals, even when they may be interconnected.

In this paper, we have sketched a rudimentary framework for making sense of this kind of engagement. In this final section, we offer some concluding observations.

First, instead of being limited to the kind of high-level politics that some observers suggest should characterize the engagement with Al Qaeda, once the peripheries are taken seriously, engagement looks quite different. There is of course no reason not to engage the center as well, but in a decentralized organization the peripheries matter. This kind of engagement may or may not involve issues of major international importance such as removing US troops from the Middle East, or curbing US support of Israel's occupation of Palestine. It is likely, however, to involve more mundane local issues and problem solving, which will matter to groups at the peripheries.³⁵

Second, because engagement necessarily involves not only different groups but also different instruments, including the application of coercive force, it is difficult to draw sharp distinctions between negotiations (whether for political or humanitarian ends) and counterinsurgency. Instead of being sharply dichotomous, it is more useful to think of these as parts of a continuum of activities and options.³⁶ Local problem-solving and political negotiation involves both coercive measures to establish order and control, as well as a more humanitarian approach to improve the lot of those who happen to live in these zones of violence.³⁷

Third, it is useful to think about this not in terms of two actors, but rather in terms of 'networks of engagement.' Once the peripheries are taken seriously, many actors become involved. Once external monitoring especially is given more prominence, networks of different actors may be mobilized to engage armed groups for the purpose of binding them to different commitments and standards.

³⁵ Among others, these are likely to include basic infrastructure issues such as policing and security, health care, education, and economic development.

³⁶ This is not to say that the relationship between humanitarian organizations and military forces is a smooth one. On the contrary, this relationship is complex, and needs to be thought through. For a discussion of the tensions involved in this, see Olson (2006).

³⁷ Andreas and Price (2001, p. 52) support this notion, by arguing that "there is a growing fusion between the world of military affairs and the world of police affairs, not to mention the world of security scholars and the world of criminologists."

Fourth, the networks of engagement go both ways. From the perspective of Al Qaeda and its peripheries, as well as from the perspective of other armed groups in other places, there is no reason to suppose that engaging organizations like the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the ICRC should be seen as a way to engage the US government and its allies. Indeed, we dare hope that such an assessment on the part of armed groups themselves may result in less violence targeting independent humanitarian and development organizations.

Fifth, Al Qaeda is a limiting case, but it is not the only limiting case that merits our attention. Once the local dynamics are taken more seriously, we can see many other groups that also do not fit the standard categories of conflict, and which are at least as threatening to people's security in the areas in which they operate. For example, more people die of crime than of terrorism or (in recent years) of warfare (Human Security Center 2005). Similarly, the stalemates between armed groups and authorities in places such as major Brazilian cities, Colombia, or parts of Central America, are as conceptually and politically challenging as the current one between Al Qaeda and the United States, and should also lead us to rethink standard approaches and frameworks.³⁸ Groups that may have begun as criminal organizations pose significant political problems once they establish de facto control over large areas of a state's territory.³⁹

It is not possible in a brief essay such as this one to provide any more than a few suggestions about how to approach all these challenges. What is beyond doubt is that the time has come to shift our focus from the center to the periphery of Al Qaeda. In so doing, we will begin to address the challenges posed by armed groups in general, regardless of their connections to Al Qaeda and its affiliates.

³⁸ See, for example, Dowdney 2003.

³⁹ The distinctions between criminal and political organizations, many observers have long argued, are historically and sociologically fuzzy (e.g. Hobsbawm 1959, Tilly 1985, Cohen 1996, Olson 2000, Sánchez and Meertens 2001, Gutiérrez Sanín 2004, Holden 2005).

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