Working paper

Rethinking armed group control

Towards a new conceptual framework

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Key messages

Prevailing understandings of control – which focus on territorial dividing lines and violent incident monitoring – miss important indicators of armed group control. We argue that armed group control should instead be broken down according to the ways in which armed groups seek to influence populations.

To exercise influence and control, armed groups apply a variety of practices, including different types of violence, dispute resolution, taxation, regulation of movement, access to aid and services, and social strictures.

Territorial markers of control tend to be misleading, as many armed groups exercise control over populations beyond areas where they are physically present, shaping and influencing civilian life in the economic, social and political spheres deep into areas thought of as 'government controlled'.

This paper proposes several alternate ways of monitoring shifts in armed group control, by focusing on practices and the development of underlying capacities required to influence civilian behaviour. The hope is that more contextualised and specific indicators can improve conflict early warning.

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About this publication

This working paper is an output of the Centre for the Study of Armed Groups at ODI. The Centre provides rigorous analysis, tailored solutions and a safe space in which to discuss the challenges of understanding and engaging with armed groups.

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Contents

Acronyms, abbreviations and terminology

AMISOM	African Union Mission in Somalia
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
IED	improvised explosive device
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NGO	non-governmental organisation
zakat	tithes
ushr	harvest tax

Executive summary

Within contemporary civil wars, control and influence are often thought of in terms of territory. In any given conflict, there is an array of colour-coded maps aiming to illustrate who controls what. Yet they so often fail to capture the everyday complexity of how armed groups operate and exert control. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the rapid collapse of the Republic in Afghanistan have demonstrated, flawed or inaccurate understandings of how combatants exert influence have profound and painful political and humanitarian consequences.

This paper outlines a new conceptual framework for understanding how armed groups exert control. Its aim is to help analysts, donors and others enhance their understanding of conflict dynamics, and ultimately improve conflict early warning. One of the main arguments of the paper is that a rethink of how armed groups exert control is urgently required:

- Armed groups seek to influence and control people and behaviour – and not necessarily territory alone.

- Armed groups often project power beyond areas where they are physically present. They do not even have to 'hold' territory to control what happens there.

- Control cannot be thought of in zero-sum terms. Armed groups, the government and others often exert fluid, overlapping forms of influence on populations.

- The assumption of state dominance may obscure actual power dynamics. The state may be only one among many actors vying for control – and not always the dominant one.

What armed groups want to control, how they do it and what drives this behaviour varies enormously across time and space and among – and even within – different armed groups. Armed group control is best thought of in terms of different forms of influence, especially vis-à-vis the civilian population. Within a given context, understanding these various forms of influence is essential to informing analyses of conflict – but they are often overlooked or their strategic importance underestimated.

Toward a new conceptual framework

To better understand how armed groups exert control over civilian life and behaviour, we distinguish between three distinct but interrelated dimensions that form a **cycle of control** (figure 1). Each dimension of the cycle constitutes a certain lens through which one can analytically approach the phenomenon of 'control':

- *Spheres of control* encompass the realms in which armed groups exercise control over civilian life. We break this dimension down into the economic, social and political, to better explore how civilians experience and navigate forms of armed group influence.

- *Practices of control* are the techniques that armed groups use to exercise control. They include, but are not limited to: various forms of direct and indirect violence, resource extraction and taxation, the regulation of civilian movement, the restriction or regulation of access to aid and essential services, and social strictures.

- *Capacities for control* describe the resources, organisational attributes and abilities that enable an armed group to exert various types of control. We break these down into coercive, organisational and financial capacities.

Figure 1   Cycle of control
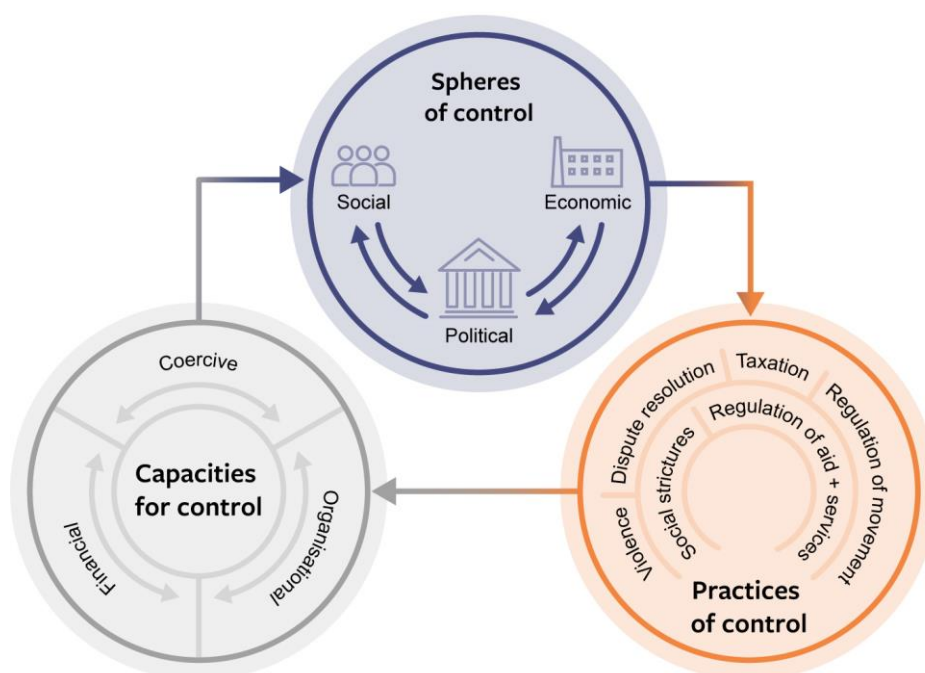
Applying the framework

The next step is to use the framework as a tool in developing and prioritising context-specific indicators for conflict early warning; practical steps for doing this are elaborated in the conclusion. While the framework explores a number of different types of practice, their relevance to early warning will vary across time, geographies and groups. The cases examined in this paper suggest **three things** are most important to track when monitoring shifts in control in real time:

- Changes in the **types and levels of violence**, especially early on in an armed group's evolution. It is essential to contextualise and monitor these changes. It is particularly important to understand the

armed group's objectives for specific forms of violence, and whether they are developing greater capacities to enact them.

- Sudden changes in **patterns of taxation, or other forms of resource extraction**, and the extent to which an armed group extracts from the local population. Such changes may indicate an evolution in the group's tactics. While taxation started later than violence in the case study countries, it was a critical marker of expanding control.

- **Provision of courts or parallel dispute resolution**. Monitoring of such provision can provide crucial insights into perceptions of an armed group's control and dominance vis-à-vis the incumbent state. Changes in participation in an armed group's system of justice can also be a bellwether of declining state legitimacy at the local level.

1 Introduction

This paper explores how armed groups seek to control territory and populations in fragile and conflict contexts. It proposes a new conceptual framework for understanding insurgent control. While this paper is conceptual, the objective is practical: to provide insights that may help analysts, donors and others enhance their understanding of conflict dynamics, which will ultimately improve conflict early warning. Understanding which indicators to pay attention to can help enhance early responses and, more widely, inform mediation, peacebuilding, development and humanitarian interventions.

1.1 Methodology

The thinking articulated in this working paper was developed through a series of different methods. The project began with a wide-ranging literature review and a series of bilateral consultations with scholars, humanitarians and conflict analysts. The team then convened an online workshop with a group of researchers and practitioners, where we presented an early iteration of the framework outlined in this paper for feedback.

To better understand experiences of armed group control on the ground, the team also looked at three case study contexts. The case studies allowed us to test the initial framing and early assumptions about the nature of armed group control. The Afghanistan case study drew on original fieldwork, while studies of Mali and Somalia relied on expert consultations, interviews with key informants and desk review. While these case studies all focused on what might be termed jihadist or Islamist armed groups – the Taliban, Al Shabaab and Jama'at Nusratul Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) – research and consultations spanned a wider spectrum of armed groups. Here we defined armed groups as those using violence to enact opposition to a national government or other actors.

For research inside Afghanistan, a team of researchers interviewed 45 individuals (including five women) in January 2022, with a focus on senior Taliban commanders and fighters, as well as civilians, in the four northern provinces of Kunduz, Baghlan, Balkh and Takhar. These were chosen as the Taliban-led insurgency in these provinces emerged relatively later, and so would likely be fresher in the minds of interviewees, and to study the impact of insurgency control beyond political provincial borders. Interviewees were selected from several different districts, including areas where insurgents emerged at the start, as well as areas where insurgents did not establish uncontested control until August 2021. In the interviews, we covered how people experienced the expansion of Taliban control through general open-ended questions, and also through thematic questions covering the different spheres of control. For each claim or incident, the researchers sought to differentiate where respondents had personally witnessed incidents or had

heard about them through secondary sources. The research team also sought to corroborate any claims through sources believed to be independent of each other.

2 Rethinking control

Within contemporary civil wars, control and influence are often thought of in terms of territory. Most analyses rely on territorial markers (e.g. demarcated frontlines) or the reported presence of armed actors in a defined locale (i.e. checkpoints or the occupation of military installations or government buildings). Other measures of control, particularly those that aim to capture contestation and levels of influence, rely on a combination of territorial dividing lines and violent incident data. In any given conflict, there is an array of colour-coded maps aiming to illustrate who controls what, but often at such a level of abstraction that they fail to capture the everyday complexity of how armed groups operate and exert control. Maps of control in Afghanistan before and after the takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 (see figure 2) illustrate how such an analysis makes meaningful early warning difficult. In many of the districts on the map at left, the Taliban was in fact already in de facto control – with the government retaining only a minimal presence.

Figure 2   Mapping control in Afghanistan
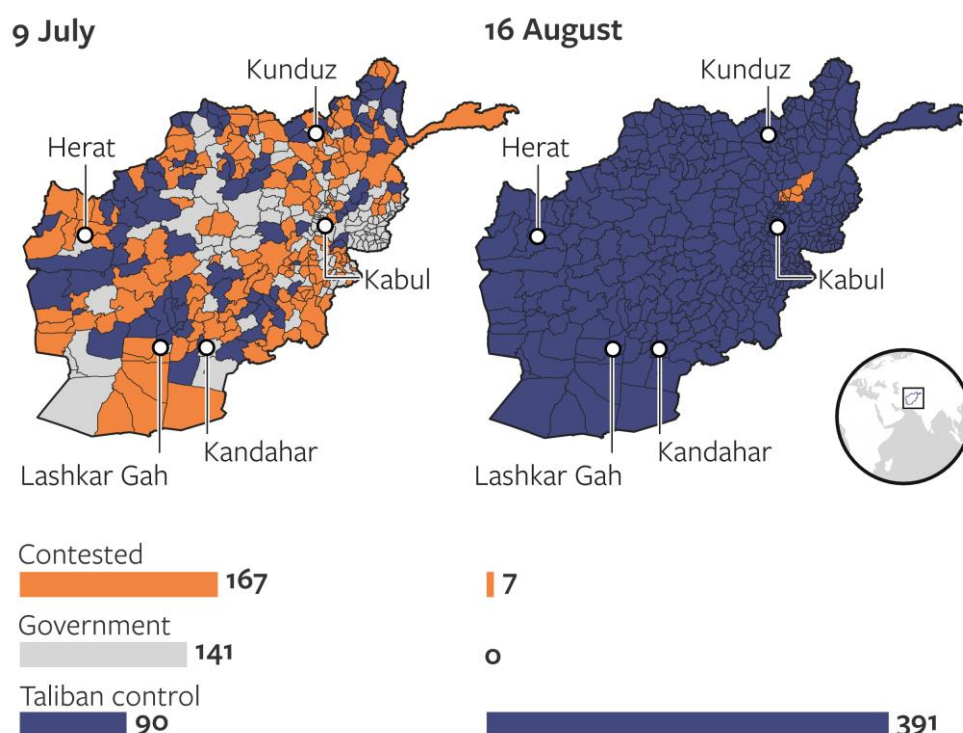
Source: BBC Research 2021. Districts according to 2005 government bodies.

11

Part of the problem is that many maps rely on violent incident data (see e.g. figure 3), which on its own does not tell us much about control. Sheer volume of incidents tells us little about the nature of dynamics on the ground. These maps tend not to break down the nature or types of security incidents in a way that conveys their relevance to the broader conflict or everyday experiences of armed group control. Some areas may have few security incidents and the government might retain a presence, but most people living there would feel an armed group exerts de facto control. Humanitarian access maps (figure 4) tend to focus on violent security incidents and to neglect other indicators, such as the presence of armed group checkpoints, which humanitarians must find a way to navigate in order to work safely.

Figure 3   Demonstration of events in Mali
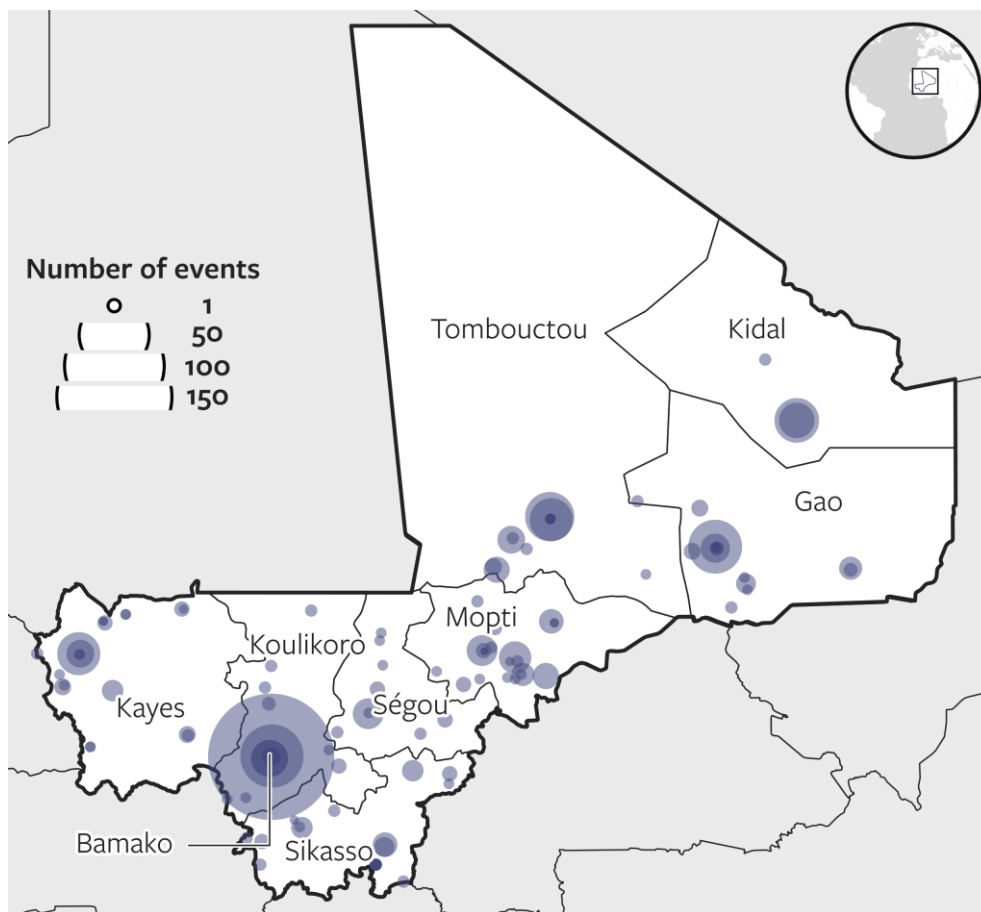
Source: ACLED 2020.

Figure 4   Humanitarian access in Somalia
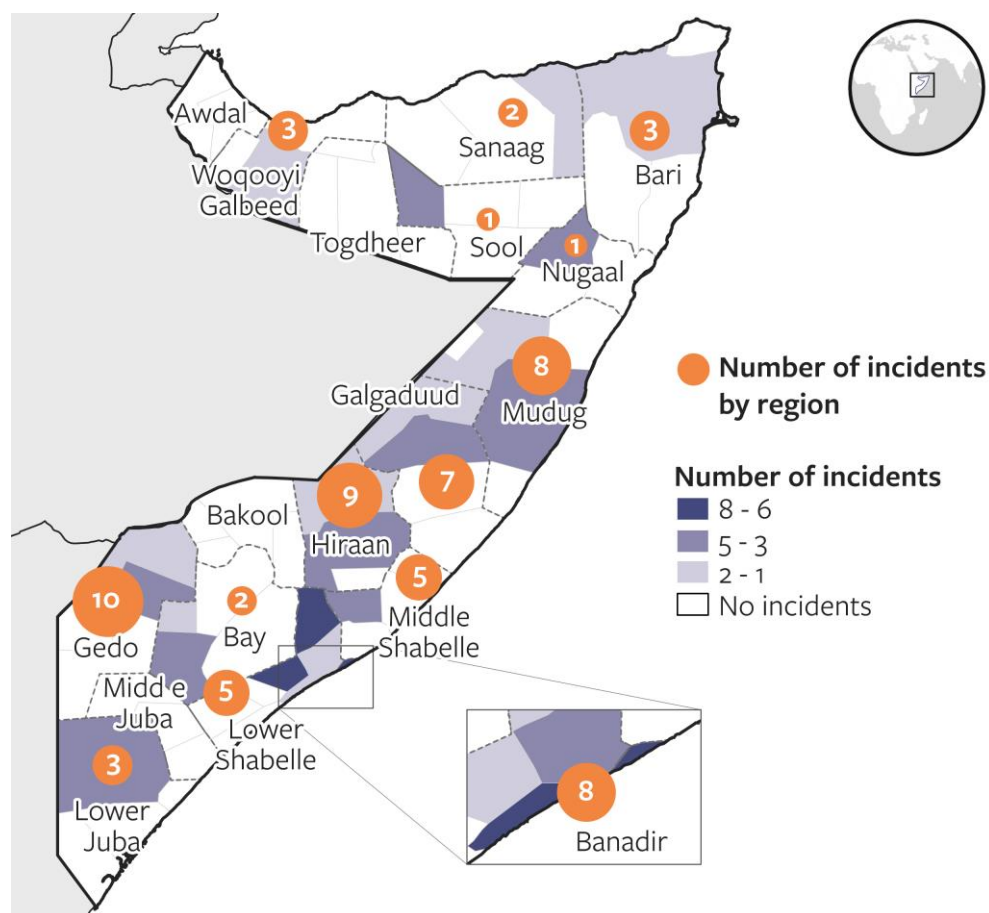
Source: OCHA, 2021.

An important starting point in our rethinking of this approach has been to recognise that **armed groups tend to seek control over people and behaviour** – not necessarily territory alone. Territorial control writ large may not even be an armed group's main objective. Peer Schouten urges us to move beyond territory and consider 'alternative geographies of power' that relocate economic and social power beyond the traditional administrative units (Schouten, 2019). His particular focus on 'roadblock politics' illuminates the importance of competition over rents on smuggling, extortion along major transit routes and armed group taxation. After all, in contexts such as the Sahel, power has historically never been about how much territory you hold, but instead about controlling what moves through the territory that you do hold (Ranieri and Strazzari, 2015). While this is particularly true of asymmetrical, low-intensity conflicts, it is also often true of more conventional or interstate wars (as with Russia's occupation of key infrastructure in Ukraine).

In practice, armed groups do not exert influence or control along clear territorial dividing lines. **Armed groups can, and often do, project power beyond areas where they are physically present.** Armed groups do not have to hold territory, or even have a stationary presence, to control or 'govern' it. Such conceptions may miss more subtle forms of influence. Where lines of control exist in theory, armed groups often traverse them,

13

seeking to infiltrate and influence civilian behaviour through intimidation, taxation or other means. The prevalence of small armed units and mobile groups of fighters can render traditional tools to assess military control meaningless. But this is not a new dynamic per se, and has been evident in more conventional historical wars as well – not least in the Second World War with regard to partisan and guerrilla tactics.

Alongside this, the digital space warrants further analysis. Armed groups have long leveraged various forms of media in pursuit of their objectives and recruited extra-territorially, but **social media and messaging apps have allowed them to bring their techniques of propaganda and coercion into new realms**. Digital space has extended the reach of armed groups, in terms of their messaging and recruitment, beyond fixed territory. Technology connects like-minded individuals at 'high[er] speeds and in great[er] numbers than ever before' (Bolt, 2012). Increased ownership and ease of use of new forms of digital technology (i.e. smartphones, the internet and social media platforms) have meant that groups can bypass editors and other filters that in the past controlled *how* and *what* was presented to a global audience (Mackinlay, 2009).

A corollary is that **control should not be thought of in zero-sum terms**. Where neither the government nor armed groups have full 'control' of an area, they will exert fluid and overlapping layers of influence. The government may still claim to control such areas, but so too may armed groups (and various armed groups might vie for control, making competing claims). Civilians and aid actors meanwhile have to navigate varying layers of influence by the state and non-state armed actors. Conceptually, this is already reflected to some extent in the literature on hybrid political orders, and mediated or limited statehood, which examines how 'competing claims to power and logics of order co-exist, overlap, intertwine' (Boege et al., 2009).

Empirically, we see this across a number of violent conflicts. Scholar Ken Menkhaus uses the concept of 'mediated statehood' to describe how the state essentially works with or in 'coexistence' with other actors and systems that perform key functions of the state (i.e. security, justice, conflict management) (Menkhaus, 2006). Kasfir et al. (2017) flip 'mediated statehood' on its head, looking at multi-layered governance where armed groups, in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, co-opt the running of state institutions within areas they control. The tacit or explicit coexistence or cooperation with their adversaries is often an essential means through which armed groups extend their reach.

Another problematic feature of prevailing thinking is the assumption of state dominance. In reality, **the state may be only one among many actors vying for control – and not always the most dominant one vis-à-vis armed groups**. In the Sahel, for example, Rupesinghe et al. (2021) describe networked forms of governance, where 'big men' act as key 'nodal points within networks of relevance to governance, markets, and violence'. These connections are built on pragmatic decision-making and, consequently, fluid alliances. It is therefore important to treat armed groups as a product of their political, cultural and economic environment, rather than as separate bodies analysed against an ideal political type of 'the state' that simply does not exist in that context. Because armed group strategies for influence and control are rooted in specific political cultures and power structures, so too should our analysis and measurement of control.

Armed groups attempt to exert influence and control over civilians to elicit their compliance and cooperation. But what armed groups want to control, how they do it and what drives this behaviour vary enormously across time and space, and between – and even within – different armed groups. They may seek to exert control to prevent civilians from spying on them or otherwise betraying them. They may pressure civilians to behave in certain ways that support their ideological or political objectives. They might also seek to extract resources, whether through ad hoc extortion, forced labour or more organised and state-like forms of taxation. These forms of influence are essential to informing analyses of conflict, but often they are overlooked or their strategic importance is underestimated.

3 Towards a new conceptual framework: spheres, practices and capacities

To improve the understanding of how armed groups exert control over civilian life and behaviour, we distinguish between three distinct but interrelated **dimensions of control**. Each dimension constitutes a certain lens through which one can analytically approach the phenomenon of 'control':

- *Spheres of control* encompass the realms in which armed groups exercise control over civilian life. We break this dimension down into the economic, social and political, to better explore how civilians experience and navigate forms of armed group influence.
- *Practices of control* are the techniques armed groups use to exercise control. They include, but are not limited to: various forms of direct and indirect violence, resource extraction and taxation, the regulation of civilian movement, the restriction or regulation of access to aid and essential services, and social strictures.
- *Capacities for control* describe the resources, organisational attributes and abilities that enable an armed group to exert various types of control. We break these down into coercive, organisational and financial capacities.

Figure 5   Cycle of control
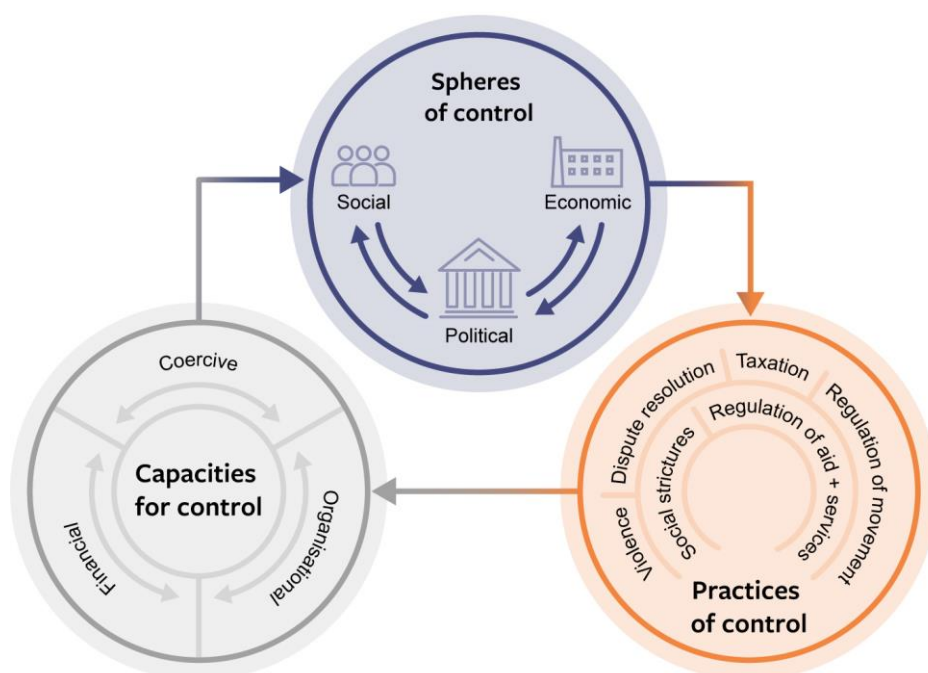
All three dimensions are closely connected and shape each other within a cycle of control (figure 5), forming the what (spheres), how (practices) and why (capacities) of armed group control. For example, armed groups draw on their capacity to apply certain methods to exert influence and control in different spheres, which, in turn, enables armed groups to acquire resources and enhance their capacity to control. We draw on this cycle of control to structure the report, exploring each dimension in detail.

Relationship with civilians: Control is not unidirectional but relational, defining the relationship between armed groups and the population. While armed groups may want to gain control and exercise authority, civilian obedience is not a given. People living under the control or influence of an armed group have agency and often attempt to change how an armed group exercises control, such as by resisting (see e.g. Cheng, 2018) or trying to negotiate certain practices (see e.g. Jackson, 2021).

A key dimension of the relationship between armed groups and civilians is the question of legitimacy. Legitimacy is a cross-cutting, interdependent aspect of this framework. Legitimacy, in its most basic empirical understanding, is expressed through voluntary obedience to an authority's control, which is achieved by responding to people's substantive values and beliefs or, more instrumentally, to their needs (see Weigand, 2015; 2022).[1]

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[1] Much of the traditional literature on legitimacy has evolved from looking at European nation states that feature a relatively high level of monopolisation of force. In the context of an armed conflict, where competing authorities exercise control, legitimacy is more diffused. As authorities with more legitimacy theoretically require less coercion to achieve control, building legitimacy can become a key strategic objective for any armed group. Armed groups may apply different strategies when attempting to build local-level legitimacy, either substantially (e.g. by drawing on existing traditions, religious beliefs or another ideology) or

Legitimacy plays a particularly important role for a group's ability to apply different practices of control and, ultimately, to exercise control across the various spheres. For example, legitimacy enables an armed group to collect taxes more easily, as it no longer has to rely on threats or the use of force. Meanwhile, how an armed group exercises control also shapes public perceptions and, ultimately, determines the group's legitimacy.

An anecdote from the fieldwork in Afghanistan, relayed by a Taliban fighter, illustrates the importance of local support:

> One day, me and another Taliban were staying at an elderly villager's house. My friend said 'I am a lion because I am fighting the infidels'. To this, the elderly man said 'yes my son, you're a lion but I am your jungle'. I said to the elderly man 'By God, you have spoken the truth for the same way that a lion can't subsist without the jungle, we are unable to subsist without the support of the people'. [2]

Relationship to the state: These three dimensions of armed group control cannot be viewed independently of context, or separately from the other authorities active in a given place and time. The most important among these is usually the state. As Stig Hansen (2019) points out, the ability to exercise control rests on what he describes as 'opportunity'. Armed groups often attempt to exploit the weaknesses of the state and civilian grievances, and the practices of the state and other authorities can create opportunities for armed groups. This is what David Kilcullen (2013) refers to as the battle for 'competitive control'. The performance of the state (or other authorities) influences the insurgent response. Ultimately, an armed group's capacity and practices are influenced, in some way, by the corresponding capacity and practices of the state and other actors.

In Mali, for example, certain groups have exploited frustration among rural communities at the lack of formal education. The emergence of religious education has been welcomed given the lack of other options (Raineri, 2020). Religious ideology has been particularly welcomed by some as it seeks to change the strict hierarchies that govern society, particularly by young Fulani. For armed groups that draw on religious ideology, the frustration among the rural communities has effectively created opportunities to reinforce their dominance politically and socially. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the Republic's focus on formalising schooling and replacing the traditional education system gave rise to a feeling of marginalisation and persecution by supporters of religious schools and fed into Taliban narratives.

Collaboration, co-option and collusion: Where armed groups do not have the requisite capacity to exert control in a certain sphere, they may collaborate or co-opt existing resources. Providing essential services such as health and education is expensive and difficult. As a result, this is one arena in which few armed groups successfully compete directly with the state. They may instead coercively co-opt schools or health clinics provided

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more instrumentally (e.g. by providing public goods and services). However, in the absence of functioning elections and other forms of macro-level accountability, the character of day-to-day interactions between armed groups and civilians, and the extent to which they are perceived as fair and respectful, is particularly important for local-level legitimacy (see Weigand, 2022).

[2] Interview with Taliban fighter from Baghlan Province, Afghanistan, January 2022.

by the state or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This was true for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, as well as the Taliban in Afghanistan.

In some instances, an armed group's objectives may be better served through collusion – even with battlefield enemies. Al Shabaab, for example, colludes with a range of actors in the licit and illicit economies, from Somali government politicians to actors linked to the Kenya Defence Forces. This allows them to profit from the broader illicit economy, while also exerting control over economic activity in areas where they are present and well beyond. Meanwhile, in a move that is often referred to as 'ceasefire capitalism' (Woods, 2011), armed groups in Myanmar have frequently entered ceasefire agreements with the government to allow both parties to exploit natural resources, such as jade, more successfully (see Brenner, 2019).

Territorial presence: This framework moves away from the dominant focus on territory, and toward the control of populations. Nevertheless, it is important to contextualise and understand the role of territorial presence in armed group strategies. The controlling of people remains closely linked to exerted control in the territory they inhabit, but an armed group might exercise influence over people in that territory in different ways. We assume that the type and extent of armed group influence in a specific area or across a segment of society may change frequently. Further, it will change over time, and may even fluctuate within certain short periods (e.g. a checkpoint or road might be controlled by the government during the day, but by an armed group at night). This helps us to see territorial presence as complex and dynamic.

While territorial presence certainly remains important, it is not always a prerequisite for exerting control over civilian behaviour. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Mai Mai deploy more subtle forms of behavioural control even when – and especially where – they lack territorial dominance. They instead rely on notions of belonging and statehood. By deploying symbols of state-like-ness, they bolster perceptions of their own authority. This 'looping effect' has allowed the Mai Mai to leverage historical memories to justify their actions and elicit civilian compliance (Hoffman and Verweijen, 2018).

Further, the importance of territory relative to specific practices varies. The Taliban, for example, needed only intermittent territorial presence to collect *ushr*, or harvest tax, in rural areas of the country. In some cases they could even collect levies without intermittent territorial presence, asking people to deliver the levies to them. However, the Taliban needed a much more extensive and stable territorial presence to establish a network of customs checkpoints along the main ring road. This helps explain why they began collecting *ushr* more or less systematically several years earlier than customs taxes (Amiri and Jackson, 2022).

4 Spheres of control
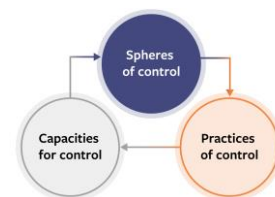
Armed groups exert control over all realms of civilian life. Breaking control down into the economic, social and political spheres (figure 6) enables a nuanced analysis of how armed group control operates and how civilians experience and navigate armed group influence. This section illustrates how armed groups exercise control across the three spheres, drawing on the research conducted on Afghanistan, Mali and Somalia.

Figure 6   Spheres of control
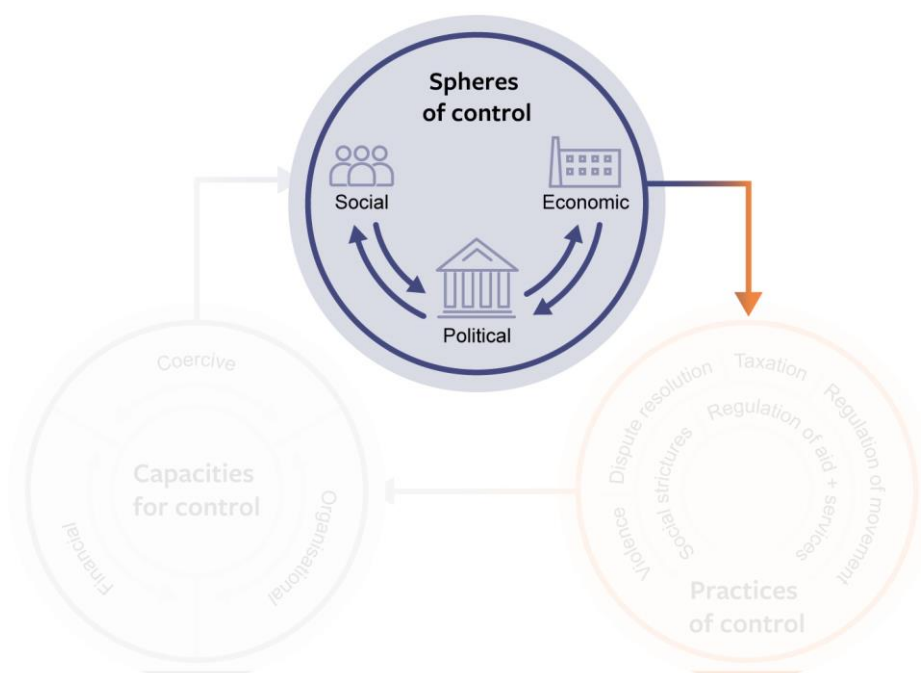
4.1   The economic sphere

Efforts to exert control over the existing economy and economic activity are typically driven by a mixture of motivations. Armed groups seek to capture or profit from certain activities to maximise their revenues, but also to deprive the government or others of these financial flows. As in other spheres, they tend to work with what is there, leveraging, adapting and capitalising on existing and recognised forms of economic logic and behaviour. They also use the economic sphere to control behaviour more widely, including attempts to implement the ideology an armed group stands for (i.e. attaching financial penalties to undesirable behaviours, taxing in line with its beliefs or ideology).

Some armed groups leverage economic influence via state-like behaviour and the creation of bureaucratic institutions to enhance perceptions of their legitimacy (Bandula-Irwin et al., 2022). This enables an armed group to show that it is dominant or is able to do what is traditionally associated with the state, performing public authority and underscoring the group's claim to statehood (ibid.). Crucially, by shaping the economic sphere, armed groups can exercise not only direct control over civilian populations, but also indirect control, through changes in the wider economic practices and standards.
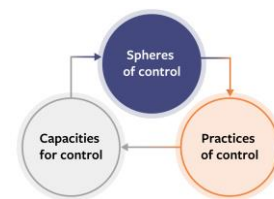
Like any other aspect of control, economic control comes in degrees. At the outset, an armed group may rely on extortion or donations to survive. But the more capacity an armed group has, the easier it becomes for the group to demand payments in a structured manner, such as monthly or annual protection payments or taxes. However, the context, and the practices of other authorities operating in the economic space (i.e. the incumbent state), matter. Some armed groups may nearly monopolise economic control in a given area, while others may only be able to (or are only interested in) more ad hoc extractive practices.

Civilians may experience overlapping layers of economic control, particularly where the armed group is competing for dominance in this sphere. For example, a truck driver transporting goods might be required to pay both an armed group (or several armed groups) and the state, in the form of taxes or bribes to its proxies (or both) (Thakur, 2021). An armed group may try to drive out competitors, or simply seek to extract resources alongside the various other demands being made on civilians by other actors.

Economic influence may considerably exceed territorial control or presence. For example, armed groups might be the only authorities collecting taxes even in areas that they can only reach infrequently, for instance, through checkpoints and patrols. Roads are particularly important for economic control, as they enable armed groups to tax trade and the transportation of goods and people. Some armed groups can even exercise a degree of economic control without any territorial control, for instance, on the basis of widespread donations (Weigand, 2020).

Al Shabaab has a strikingly sophisticated strategy of economic influence, ranging from taxation to collusion in various aspects of international commodities trades. Focused on financial control and surveillance of economic activity, Al Shabaab's efforts reportedly earn them more revenue than the government collects (Harper, 2020). This yields a surplus of funds, which the group reportedly invests in various enterprises, including small to medium-sized businesses (NATO Strategic Direction South, 2021). The group's influence over the economic sphere extends well beyond the territories it is said to control. In some instances, it can access state fiscal records to 'assess' how much a given company or individual should be paying it (Faruk and Bearak, 2019).

The Taliban in Afghanistan has also developed a relatively sophisticated economic strategy. Unlike in the 1990s, when the movement's primary revenue generation was through the exploitation of illicit traffic in legal goods to Pakistan, the group has a much more diversified revenue-generation portfolio (Felbab-Brown, 2021). In the development of its taxation system, the group initially focused on the taxation of *ushr* (harvest tax) and *zakat* (tithes), since shares of these Islamic taxes were historically given to the clergy. Additionally, there was little competition as the Republic did not collect these

Islamic taxes from the population (although they did collect other forms of tax).

Over time, however, the group appears to have strongly embedded itself in mineral extraction and the drug trade. As the group's control extended, it also began to levy taxes on the transportation of goods traversing areas controlled by the insurgents, particularly those in close vicinity to neighbouring countries. The Taliban appears to have justified and legitimised its policy by appealing to either local norms, such as in the case of *ushr* and *zakat*, or state norms, such as taxation and levies on the production and transport of goods. The group's focus on high-compliance tactics (which draw on pre-existing practices or norms, making them more likely to be accepted) is combined with a focus on legitimising policies.
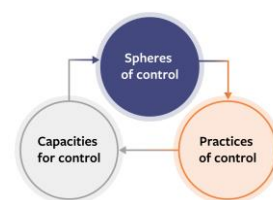
Zakat is also implemented by JNIM. JNIM uses this taxation system not only as a source of revenue, but also to redistribute funds to civilian populations (ICG, 2021; Rupesinghe and Boas, 2019). Evidence suggest that the collection of *zakat* became more common in 2017 and may be more prevalent in central Mali than in the north. It can be paid in the form of money or livestock, and is collected primarily during visits to villages, rather than by the setting up of checkpoints, to avoid detection.[3]

While JNIM may not (yet) demonstrate the level of sophistication displayed by Al Shabaab or the Taliban, taxation does enable it to maintain a toe-hold in areas where it does not have a stable presence. Even when JNIM members, such as Ansar Dine, lost territorial control in the north following the French intervention, they were still able to tax and raid villages where opposing forces were not present (Hansen, 2019). JNIM also exercises an element of control over economic activity around the main cities in the north by taxing traders passing through territory outside those cities, helping to enforce a sense of 'being everywhere, but invisible' (ibid.).

In the early phases of the insurgency in the north of Mali, there were reports connecting jihadist armed groups to drug smuggling that passed through northern territories. However – as with other armed groups – evidence of a direct link is not always clear, and it may be more likely that these groups tax smuggling routes rather than being directly involved (Hansen, 2019).[4] While Ansar Dine displayed hostility towards drug smugglers in the early phases following the French intervention, the group is believed to have at times come to rely on such actors for logistical support to avoid detection (ICG, 2019a). While not physically present at mining sites, Ansar Dine demand *zakat* from artisanal gold miners (ICG, 2019b). At the same time, there are disagreements over economic strategy. There are divisions within the membership in central Mali, between local and non-local fighters (Malians from outside central Mali) (Nsaibia and Weiss, 2020). The decision by Katiba Macina only to cap and not to ban the *jowro* taxation system that is imposed on herders to access pasture led to members defecting to Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), which had a more 'revolutionary' position on the issue.[5]

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[3] Key informant interview, March 2022.
[4] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[5] Key informant interview, February 2022.

4.2   The social sphere

Armed groups attempt to control the social space and behaviour of civilians by shaping and enforcing certain rules. We can think of these in two broad categories: operational and normative. Operational rules might be purely about the security and self-preservation of the armed group. The group might not want civilians to have smartphones, for example, lest they tip off its adversaries. Alternatively, it may prohibit certain types of behaviour or movement (i.e. visiting government offices, travelling to certain locales).

More broadly, however, the social sphere is about eliciting normative compliance. Dressing a certain way, engaging in certain activities, speaking a certain language, having a certain ringtone or haircut, and so on, all confirm a certain kind of obedience. They are all acts of submission that, in various ways, confirm armed group dominance. This exteriority not only sends a message to the armed group, but also signals the degree of armed group control to the wider civilian population in an immediately visible way. This may in turn influence other civilians to 'follow the rules'; doing otherwise might make them conspicuous and arouse armed group suspicion that they are likely to rebel in other ways.

How armed groups regulate social behaviour is very context-specific, usually aligned with their ideologies or political objectives. The ideologies and objectives of armed groups differ enormously, not only in their content but also in the extent and level of detail with which particular institutions and strategies are institutionalised (i.e. encoded in manifestos or rules, transmitting verbally in a consistent way, enforced through incentives and punishments). Alongside this, it is important to acknowledge that the degree to which ideology is adhered to by armed group members also varies across groups and over time (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood, 2014). We can reasonably expect that groups with a sophisticated and articulated ideology, and with a high degree of internal adherence, are more likely to regulate social behaviour. Schubiger and Zelina (2017) refer to these qualities as internal institutionalisation and external intrusiveness, and both are important to consider when examining specific armed group practices in the social sphere.

While the types of social control that are enforced vary, there are similarities concerning how social control is exercised. A particular example is the use of courts to achieve social control, beyond the ad hoc enforcement of rules by fighters and police-like forces (discussed in more detail below). For example, mobile courts enable armed groups to exercise social control independently of territorial control, offering under-the-radar dispute resolution to citizens and thereby building legitimacy and shaping behaviour. However, armed groups may also try to influence other organisations that shape social order, for instance, by co-opting traditional authorities or the education system at large. Again, the exercise of social control has a symbolic dimension. Establishing courts and police-like forces reinforces claims to authority and legitimacy.

Al Shabaab's brutal forms of social control are well-documented, from whipping those with un-Islamic haircuts to banning female genital mutilation. But Al Shabaab's social control is not only ideological, it is also performative. The 2018 ban on plastic bags made international headlines in part because it seemed so absurd. It nevertheless sent a message about Al Shabaab's vision of itself, as a state-like authority, acting to regulate civilian behaviour
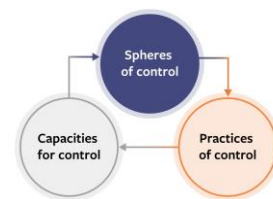
for a greater purpose. Yet for all of its ideological strictness, Al Shabaab has shown that it is willing to accommodate civilians on this front when it is in its interests to do so. For example, it has been known to make deals with strategically located communities, exchanging free passage and intelligence for a degree of protection and flexibility on normative obedience (i.e. women's rights, religious worship).
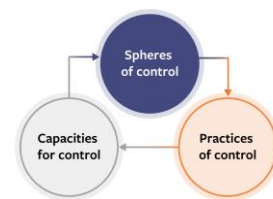
The ways in which the Taliban has sought to shape social behaviour has changed over time. The group's reaction to social behaviours that challenge its authority, such as displays of the Republic flag, has often been brutal including assassinating, beating or imprisoning culprits. However, in areas where the group had weak or contested control, it largely abstained from regulating other forms of behaviour, such as the choice of clothes, hairstyles and facial hair. Instead, it took a relatively softer approach, which involved preaching against such practices in the mosque. But once the group had established firm control, it did seek to formally regulate social behaviour. In such areas, the group continued with the preaching method for behaviours such as those above, but for other behaviours – those viewed as criminal by the group, such as not praying in local mosques or retaining promiscuous content on mobile phones – the group largely relied on coercive and humiliating tactics.

The extent to which JNIM looked to impose social control over civilians appears similarly varied over time. This may be linked to what the group felt civilians are willing to comply with. For example, in the early phases of the insurgency in central Mali, Katiba Macina established itself as effective in terms of dealing with disputes and returning stolen cattle, and also delivered basic services (Tobie and Sanagre, 2019; ICG, 2019b). Only later on did it begin collecting *zakat*, encouraging civil disobedience and non-payment of state taxes, prohibiting certain behaviours (i.e. listening to music, playing football) and enforcing stricter dress codes and travel restrictions for women (Tobie and Sangare, 2019; ICG, 2019b).

While there have been documented cases of *hudud* punishments (i.e. stoning, cutting off of hands, whipping), they have not been 'systematic'[6] and have been applied with a certain degree of 'pragmatism' (ICG, 2021). In the early phases, around 2012, the sharia enforcement was seen by some to be a 'foreign' imposition and was met with civilian resistance (Svensson and Finnbogasson, 2021). At the time, both leadership within Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine argued that the population needed to be educated first, before sharia could be strictly implemented (Baldoro and Diall, 2020; ICG, 2021).

4.3   The political sphere

Armed groups compete with the state and other authorities over control and influence in the political sphere. In other words, they seek to co-opt, capture or replace decision-making and authority structures. How armed groups approach (or avoid) certain politics is, in turn, informed by their understanding and views of existing political structures and practices. Regarding the state, armed groups typically seek to violently disrupt and prevent the state from fulfilling core functions, such as protecting the population and delivering

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[6] Key informant interview, February 2022.

essential services. This not only erodes state presence, but also undermines perceptions of state legitimacy and sends a message to the civilian population about the costs of supporting the state. At least politically, many armed groups do not tolerate competition. They may form alliances to extend their influence or control, which result in a kind of power-sharing, but most ultimately seek political dominance.
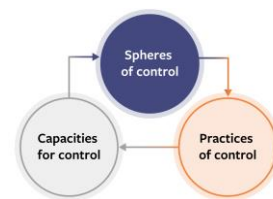
To establish political dominance, some groups create or empower structures that can help expand their influence over the population. That might mean establishing their own shadow governance structures to replace the state or other forms of authority. That said, the ability to set up a shadow government that largely dislodges and replaces the incumbent state is a high bar to clear for many armed groups. It requires clear command, internal obedience and coherence, significant resources and strategic vision.

Consequently, many armed groups use techniques of co-option, particularly concerning non-state or informal authorities. In so doing, they seek to remake local dynamics and power structures to serve their aims. For example, they may seek to divide and rule, elevating certain types of customary authorities or religious actors over others. At times, this may be about replacing state supporters, or local authorities who they see as aligned with the enemy or otherwise untrustworthy. In other instances, this may be driven by ideological concerns, wherein the armed group prefers certain forms of local authority and may wish to disempower or eradicate others.

These allied actors then enforce the armed group's authority and typically benefit from their role. The allied actors may be active in their cooperation, pushing back on or otherwise attempting to shape the behaviour of the armed group to suit their objectives. Some may use their position to further personal interests, such as self-enrichment. Others may act according to collective interests, seeking to mediate the damaging effects of the armed group's presence on the wider population. Particularly where an armed group enacts violence against the civilian population, these actors may feel they have no real choice other than to cooperate. But real-life dynamics are often muddled and complex, combining a 'relationship of threat' with 'the rewards of power' (Nordstrom, 1997: 55). People may feel they have no choice, lest they be killed or their loved ones suffer, but at the same time benefit from their cooperation with the armed group.

All of this is shaped by, and in reaction to, the larger political context in which armed groups are situated. The relationships between the various authorities – including armed groups, the state and state-affiliated militias, as well as informal authorities – play a key role in explaining the behaviour of armed groups in the political sphere. Armed groups often respond to and exploit weaknesses in the behaviour of their enemies. For example, the Taliban exploited civilian frustration with the Republic's corruption and anger over abuses committed by international and Afghan state forces. When asked to talk about how civilian support for the Taliban increased, many Afghans interviewed immediately pointed to the behaviour of the state and international forces. A teacher referenced how 'foreign forces targeted locals, regardless of whether they were Taliban or non-Taliban', while a doctor in Kunduz pointed to 'the proliferation of local militias' that stole from Afghans.

Armed groups also respond to political realities. Al Shabaab long sought political dominance to the exclusion of nearly all other actors, and broadly treated clan and customary authorities with suspicion. However, it reversed

its long-standing exclusion of clan elders from its governance structures around 2014 and formed a Council of Elders in 2016, realising that extending a degree of respect and legitimacy to the clan elders would, in turn, enhance its own legitimacy in the eyes of civilians (Shire, 2021). More recently, Al Shabaab has attempted to apply the same logic to communities. The continued presence of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) means Al Shabaab cannot hold these spaces militarily as it once might have (or would stand to lose a great deal if it tried). So it negotiates – albeit using threats of mass violence or blockades – instead.
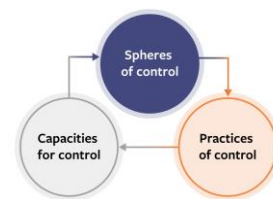
An armed group's ability to do any of this is heavily influenced, as with the economic and social dimensions, by its capacities, which tend to wax and wane over time and across the territory in which the group operates. Al Shabaab is a case in point, with a political structure that has been remarkably resilient in the face of military challenges. Al Shabaab has also significantly evolved, ideologically and operationally, from its roots in the Islamic Courts Union. Today, Al Shabaab's political aspect can be thought of as dual. In the areas where it has the most influence and presence, it operates relatively sophisticated shadow governance structures that have effectively replaced the state. Another dynamic exists in frontline areas and areas where the government is dominant, including major cities. Here, Al Shabaab infiltrates and exerts coercive influence over existing structures, undermining the state through violence, rather than establishing a full-fledged rival administration.

The Taliban, on the other hand, followed a different trajectory, moving from a relatively diffused network-based insurgency to a more centralised shadow governance structure. The movement went through a centralisation phase in the early 2010s, where it sought to break independent groups and monopolise strategic decision-making. Yet its local-level policy remained relatively decentralised. Local commanders appeared to have the latitude to adapt directives to fit local circumstances or personal inclinations. This approach allowed the group to accommodate a diverse range of opinions internally and cater to a wider range of constituencies as its control expanded beyond its historical heartlands. It also marked a shift from the 1990s, when policymaking was more centralised under the emir.

In Mali, JNIM should not be viewed as a unitary actor, but rather as a 'jihadist coalition' built around partially autonomous groups (Baldoro and Diall, 2020). Formed in 2017, JNIM brought together Ansar Dine, AQIM, Katiba Macina and Al Mourabatin under a 'polycentric' structure.[7] JNIM also straddles two separate insurgencies, in northern Mali and central Mali, which have their own historical manifestations, trajectories and social norms, which influence individual member groups' structures and decision-making (Thurston, 2020).[8]

While JNIM offers an operational name that these separate groups fall under, underneath its central leadership its structure is described as loose and decentralised.[9] Dealings with the Malian government and negotiations regarding ceasefires go through JNIM leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, but most other decisions are delegated to local commanders (ibid.). The group is also aligned with Al Qaeda, but over time JNIM (particularly Iyad Ag Ghaly) appears to have become more autonomous from AQIM's central leadership
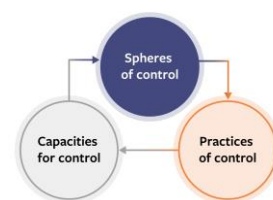
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[7] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[8] Key informant interview, February 2022 and March 2022.
[9] Key informant interview, March 2022

(Thurston, 2020).[10] There are also varying opinions on how the individual member groups are structured (Thurston, 2020), with members such as Katiba Macina believed to be built around sub-groups.[11]

Similar to Al Shabaab, JNIM has demonstrated a willingness to work with local power structures and customs. How JNIM imposes control varies across regions within Mali, influenced by how the dominant local populations (i.e. Fulani, Arab and Tuareg) perceive control in a given area.[12] The decision-making and local bargains struck by local commanders can lead to different interpretations of certain areas of JNIM doctrine, such as the enforcement of sharia law. The various groups that comprise JNIM also appear to operate a decentralised structure. Within Katiba Macina, below the main leadership is a provincial leadership structure, which oversees the collection of *zakat*, the provision of justice and the organisation of attacks (Baldoro and Diall, 2020). Provincial leaderships include local communal leaders, forming a system of 'shadow governance'; this allows Katiba Macina to stay in remote bases, while day-to-day village affairs are managed by others (ICG, 2019c).
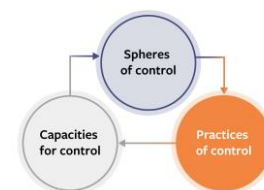
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[10] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[11] Key informant interview, March 2022
[12] Key informant interview, February 2022.

5 Practices of control

This section explores various practices of control (figure 7), which may correspond to one or several of the spheres of control outlined above. In other words, different practices will be required to influence different spheres. Rather than presenting an exhaustive catalogue of the techniques armed groups use to exert influence and control, this section draws on empirical material primarily from Afghanistan, Mali and Somalia to illustrate the diversity of practices.

Figure 7   Practices of Control
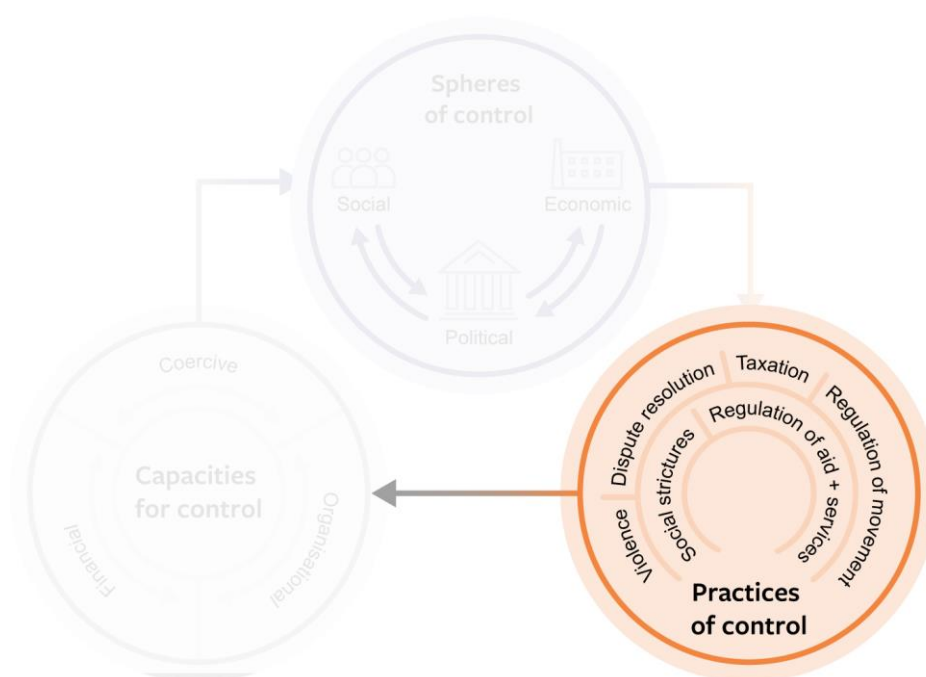
5.1 Violence

Our research suggests that violence is best understood as a tool to achieve control, and which is consciously applied by armed groups, rather than as an indicator of control (or contestation). As Staniland (2012) suggests, what helps us to gain a better understanding of control is not the amount of violence (i.e. the number of security incidents) but *how* violence is applied and for what purpose. This framing assumes violence is rational and strategic

at the group level. That might not always be the case with a given armed group, particularly in an armed group's inception period, when violence may be more ad hoc and chaotic (Kalyvas, 2004). But where a basic command structure and clear shared goals emerge, violence quickly becomes purposeful.

To use violence to exert greater control over civilians, an armed group must be able to control the conduct of its fighters and be able to demonstrate that control to the population. The more targeted the violence, the higher the level of difficulty and sophistication. Organisational and other challenges typically impact the degree of selectivity and tell us about the armed group's capacities (i.e. an armed group may have a strategy, but limited command and control impacts their ability to communicate and execute a greater degree of selectivity). Beyond command and control and organisational structure, capacities for intelligence gathering and military training and access to certain kinds of weaponry and technology all determine the degree of selectivity an armed group can employ.

It is important to pay attention to the degree of discrimination in violence because it tells a great deal about a group's internal control. Where or when an armed group is disorganised, immature or on the back foot, violence tends to be less selective (Raleigh, 2012). If a group is on the defensive or splintering, for example, it may lose these capacities and revert to less selective violence. It also tells us about the group's level of control in a given locale. As work on the Taliban demonstrates, certain types of violence are on the whole more selective in strongholds than in areas where the group is on the defensive or less established (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

With regard to control, this kind of violence can be seen as having primary and secondary targets (Jackson, 2021). Primary targets are those whose actions merit direct punishment (i.e. spies, those who directly act against or defy the insurgency). Secondary targets can be seen as the wider civilian population or the audience for this violence. Punishment of primary targets must be so severe that it outweighs the benefits of betrayal, and it must be communicated to the civilian population to act as a deterrent. Hultman (2007) finds that intense violence in a neighbouring locale can sway civilian calculations by signalling insurgent resolve and staying power.

'Selective violence' is a relative and contextually-bound category of behaviours, shaped by local norms and civilian perceptions of proportionality. Violence is being used to communicate a message, and so it must speak to existing civilian fears, desires and biases. This is particularly true with regard to subtler forms of coercion, whether it is a threatening letter, or an indirect threat carried through a third party. It typically also aligns with the group's strategy and capacities, as well as the kind of war its adversary is waging. It does not, for example, make sense to plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) if there are no tanks, armoured vehicles or security patrols.

In disentangling degrees of selectivity, it is helpful to envision a spectrum, ranging from indiscriminate to highly selective. The type of violence enacted will depend on the armed group in question, its capacities and the context. This might include barrel bombs or other indiscriminate uses of air power, or mass killings or casualty attacks in certain circumstances. Indiscriminate violence may be based on an overly broad targeting category, such as an entire ethnic group, or on no real category at all. It could also encompass
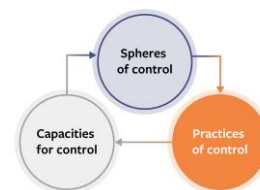
certain forms of ad hoc criminality, particularly those that serve individual rather than group objectives, such as disorganised extortion or looting.

More selective forms of violence entail narrower targeting. Targeted assassinations and abductions are typically highly selective, at least where they get the targeting right. They send a broader message to the civilian population that exploits the other side's inability to protect civilians and demonstrates that they can 'get to anyone'. The emergence of these kinds of tactics often flags the development of clear targeting capacities and demonstrates an ability to collect valuable intelligence. All of that requires a degree of territorial presence (or, at least, infiltration) and civilian compliance (coerced or voluntary). It may also presage further infiltration, as the armed group aims to eliminate those most likely to resist their influence and to send a broader message to the civilian population.
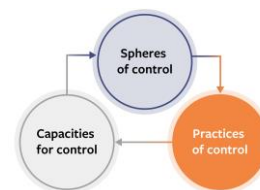
With some techniques of violence, outsiders may not always be able to immediately discern the target or degree of selectivity. A suicide bomb attack on a crowded market might still be selective if the group believes a high-value target is in the area or the area holds significance vis-à-vis the group's military strategy (i.e. proximity to government or military offices). The intention and objectives of the armed group matter, but, at the same time, its ability to be selective might be impeded by a lack of intelligence or other capacity deficits.

In understanding control, it may also be instructive to examine how the armed group defines 'civilians' and whether it specifically designates protected categories of people. It tells us who the group believes it can afford to protect in a given place at a given time (even if it does not always extend those protections in practice). The more control a group has in a given locale, the more likely it may be to broaden out protections. All things being equal, the group will probably have a greater interest in protecting the population, so long as it does not feel under threat, and less need to use overt forms of violence. Violence may take on more institutionalised forms, such as armed group courts or disciplinary mechanisms, as armed groups consolidate control. Other tactics may be dialled down a notch. Abductions may become less violent, for example, or more often used to extract intelligence.

This does not necessarily mean a group will become less violent, or less violent towards civilians, as it gains greater capacity to be selective. Those groups that rely heavily on the civilians in their early days might be *less* inclined to use indiscriminate violence toward them at the outset. Doing so would risk alienating the populations that they are dependent upon. Once they gain greater control, however, they may be harsher toward civilians, feeling less inclined to accommodate their demands or preferences and more able to exert control via coercion.

This framework does not exclude the possibility of an armed group using less violence towards civilians at the outset. Rather, it looks at the capacity of an armed group and what influences its choice of violent tactics over time. The most important things to understand regarding violence are:

- *how* a specific armed group uses violence (or refrains from using violence) to exert control in a given locale and time period, and

- what any shifts in tactics signal about control.

Thus, interpreting the use of violence and its implications must be rooted within a broader analysis of the group's history, narratives and objectives.

How violence is used by an armed group can have significant implications for the different spheres of control. Politically, they use violence to instil fear and discourage civilians from collaborating with their adversaries. In response, some communities entered into negotiated positions with JNIM by 'giving up' (i.e. encouraging to join) male members of the family in return for peaceful relations with the group (Abatan and Sangare, 2021).
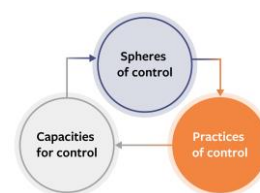
JNIM also uses violence to enforce social and economic control. While its implementation of sharia has not been systematic, JNIM has demonstrated that it is willing to use violence as a means to impose strict social control, particularly aimed at women. JNIM member Katiba Macina whipped, abducted and, in some cases, killed, those who did not follow its strict moral code (ICG, 2019c). This violence serves to break down the old system that JNIM seeks to replace, by attacking symbols that challenge its 'social imagery' (i.e. state officials, secular schools) (Sandor, 2018). In early phases of the insurgency in central Mali in 2015, Katiba Macina carried out assassinations of figures of authority who challenged its authority or those accused of collaborating with the state. In 2016, as the group spread into new areas, it employed a similar tactic (Thurston, 2020). At the same, the selectivity of the group's violence demonstrates a strategic logic, avoiding the complete removal of the pillars and norms that uphold a societal system.[13]

In a given context, it may be more accurate to analyse cycles of violence rather than try to identify phases linked to a linear evolution. In the case of Mali, given the structure of JNIM, it is difficult to draw distinct phases in the use of violence by the group, perhaps reflecting the variation between the two main operating areas of central and northern Mali and the different members operating under JNIM.[14] For example, data suggests that JNIM is more concerned regarding civilian casualties than ISGS (Raleigh et al., 2020). However, at times, this may have been more of a 'red line' for JNIM members operating in northern Mali than for those in central Mali.[15] Furthermore, the insurgency in central Mali became characterised by an ethnicisation of the violence not seen in the north and provides an explanation as to the variation in the levels of violence witnessed between the two regions (Thurston, 2020).

It is also argued in the literature that the loss of territorial control resulted in a move away from the use of violence as a means of instilling fear, and towards the exercising of restraint, in a bid to win the 'hearts and minds' of civilians (Campana, 2018). Others suggest that in the early phases JNIM displayed more restraint in its use of violence towards civilians as it tried to build up its reputation as 'protector'. It was when the group grew in confidence that it switched to more indiscriminate forms of violence.[16] At times and in certain areas, members of JNIM have demonstrated restraint in the level of violence that they use against civilians in the imposing of social rules. In Kidal, JNIM member Ansar Dine refrained from a 'confrontational' enforcing of sharia, influenced by their willingness to accommodate existing religious leaders and rulings in line with local tradition (Bouhlel and

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[13] Key informant interview, March 2022.
[14] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[15] Key informant interview, March 2022.
[16] Key informant interview, February 2022.

Guichaoua, 2021). However, the restraint in the use of violence later changed in response to increasing pressure from French forces (ibid.).

Given the eye-wateringly high levels of violence that Al Shabaab enacts and the wide margin of error and collateral damage it is willing to accept, it may feel counterintuitive to refer to this violence as selective. It is, nevertheless, organised and strategic, with different tactics employed in pursuit of different goals related to control. Like the Taliban, there is also a clear difference in the degree of selectivity it employs in areas where it has consolidated control versus contested or government areas, where it is typically less selective.

'Grey areas' – where Al Shabaab exerts some, but not total, control – see some of the highest levels of current violence. This violence appears to be driven by an array of different factors and motives. While frontlines have not significantly shifted over the past three years, portions of these contested areas move back and forth. There is typically retaliation against the civilian population when a town or area changes hands, both when Al Shabaab takes over as well as when the government assumes control. The civilian population is viewed as collaborators or potential spies and is typically punished in various ways.

On the whole, however, the conflict is effectively a stalemate in territorial terms. In grey areas, Al Shabaab is not always using violence to gain full territorial control – as that would not be feasible so long as AMISOM remains. But the use of violence nevertheless allows Al Shabaab to achieve greater degrees of control over specific populations and activities. This is also true well beyond areas we can call contested. Al Shabaab has a significant presence in Mogadishu, which allows it to credibly coerce the civilian population to behave in specific ways. When it calls to issue threats to government officials or businessmen, its targets know that it is nearby, watching, and capable of carrying out its threats.

Assassinations by Al Shabaab can be difficult to fully or accurately explain; in some cases they are political and dual-purpose: primarily eliminating opposition (i.e. individuals affiliated with AMISOM or the Somali government), while secondarily communicating the costs of aligning with the group's enemies. In other cases, they might primarily be used to send a broader message. This is true in instances where Al Shabaab assassinates business owners who have refused to pay the group; killing the individual does not get him or her to pay, but it sends a broader message about the costs of non-payment.

Similarly in Afghanistan, the Taliban used assassinations to remove threats (i.e. government officials) and intimidate civilians (i.e. by killing those showing overt government support). But the group also instrumentalised violence to show that the Republic was incapable of bringing security. In government areas, assassinations and facilitation of general criminality supported the Taliban's narrative that the government was incapable. In marked contrast, the group would take a strict approach to criminals in areas under its control to project its image as a force for security and stability. This was particularly on display around Kabul following the 2020 Doha agreement, as assassinations and criminality spiked in the capital.
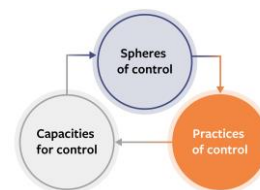
Box 5.1 Monitoring violent practices of control

Incident or attack levels are not necessarily the most important thing to measure. Instead, it may be more important to pay attention to shifts in the type of violence, where it is being executed and the degree of relative selectivity.

- Levels of violence can be deceptive. Violence may drop or become more selective where the armed group is more confident of its influence and control, or where local accommodations have been reached that formalise the group's dominance.

- Shifts in the timing of violent practices (i.e. from night-time to daytime and vice versa) can indicate changes in the level of control.

- Shifts in how selectively violent practices are applied indicate changes in the level of control, with higher selectivity indicating enhanced control or capacity for control.

- Assigning motives to, and even attributions for, certain tactics can be difficult, particularly in real time. Some tactics, such as assassinations or disappearances, may require a longer-term dive into the situational or qualitative aspects of how it is being executed and who is being targeted.

- Because various tactics may be used in different locales to achieve different objectives at the same time, subnational analysis – rooted in the political economy of a given locale – is essential.
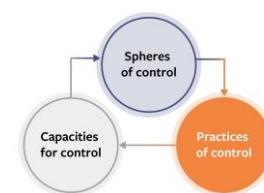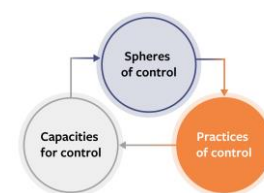
5.2   Dispute resolution and justice provision

Another particularly prominent practice of control are courts or other forms of parallel justice. This can work in several different ways to further an armed group's control. In Afghanistan, a Taliban fighter argued that it was 'obvious that a system that doesn't have courts is meaningless' because 'courts mean ruling over the people, enforcing your writ on the people, enjoying your power, and establishing your government'.[17] Providing their own forms of dispute resolution allows armed groups to capitalise on civilian dissatisfaction with insecurity and injustice. By offering dispute resolution that is perceived as fairer, or at least more predictable and effective, armed groups use these mechanisms to gain leverage and legitimacy, both of which are crucial capacities (see Jackson and Weigand, 2020; Weigand, 2017).

Dispute resolution, in turn, allows armed groups to establish a presence in communities and clear links with civilians. Even where courts are mobile or transitory, adjudicating disputes allows the armed group to develop a direct relationship with the population. For some, it is a positive encounter with an armed group they may only have known through its acts of violence. Al Shabaab's growth out of the Islamic Courts Union, and the establishment of its own sharia courts, has given it both religious legitimacy and a more positive aspect in the eyes of civilians. For many groups, courts tend to be among the earliest form of shadow governance we see armed groups enact.

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[17] Interview with Taliban fighter from Takhar Province, Afghanistan, January 2022.

For Al Shabaab, the courts allow it to present a more positive image to civilians, counterbalancing the violence it inflicts with a useful service. The courts are typically seen as faster and fairer than government courts, which they have now largely replaced in many rural areas. Al Shabaab courts are spare and adaptable, comprising a judge and perhaps some other Al Shabaab officials. They can be relocated easily and are low cost. In Afghanistan, the Taliban applied a similar strategy. 'Government courts were problematic from the start', according to one man interviewed. 'But as Taliban control extended, people turned away from the government courts. Rulings by the Taliban were seen as just. Also, Taliban decisions were quick and did not require paying officials.'[18]

Justice provision has also been a key component of the insurgency in central Mali, both in terms of the opportunity created by negative perceptions of existing state justice and the subsequent response from JNIM members. For some, the system of justice enforced by Katiba Macina has been seen as more impartial and efficient than that of the state (Thurston, 2020; Rupesinghe and Boas, 2019). Perhaps tellingly, symbols of state justice have been targeted through the kidnapping of judges.[19]

The members of JNIM have also shown a willingness – or even a need – to work with locally appointed judges, rather than simply those appointed by the group, to avoid accusations that the justice implemented is a 'foreign' imposition that ignores local customs (ICG, 2021). In Kidal, under the 'approval' of Ansar Dine, the group is said to have allowed the appointment of judges by civilians (ibid.). Previously, in other regions, such as Timbuktu, Ansar Dine were said to have struggled to implement justice for various reasons, such as a lack of experienced judges within the group and difficulties navigating local customs (Hansen, 2019).

Courts also further armed groups' efforts to infiltrate new areas and populations. They allow groups to gather intelligence and learn more about individuals, social cleavages and social dynamics. These mechanisms reinforce armed group social control, enabling them to shape norms and behaviour. In courts, behaviour that violates the rules and norms that a group is trying to establish can be sanctioned, contributing to people changing their practices.

In some instances, armed group dispute resolution allows civilians to 'forum shop', picking the most advantageous system through which to pursue their claim. In many other instances, however, armed groups seek to erode and replace existing justice provision mechanisms – particularly those associated with the state. This was the case with the Taliban, particularly as it consolidated and expanded its influence. For many armed groups, parallel courts allow them to assume the coercive authority of the state, and to replace the state's role in making and enforcing the rules.

Establishing courts can deepen an armed group's influence in the economic sphere by enabling the group to rule over cases on debt, payments and taxes, and to set the rules that govern the economic spheres according to its ideas. Where state justice is ineffectual or corrupt, business owners may see armed groups' courts as the only viable mechanism through which to settle

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[18] Interview with farmer from Kunduz Province, Afghanistan, January 2022.
[19] Key informant interview, March 2022.

commercial disputes. This, in turn, creates linkages between armed groups and the private sector that the armed group may leverage in other ways.

Dispute resolution has the added advantage, from the armed group perspective, of not requiring much territorial control. These mechanisms can take the form of a travelling or mobile court. In Afghanistan, for instance, the Taliban's courts only became more permanent with growing control. Mobile courts have also been utilised by JNIM members. Katiba Macina has been described as turning up on motorbikes, to enforce 'immediate' rulings on issues such as land conflicts (Rupesinghe and Boas, 2019). The use of mobile courts has been described as a means for the group to project its presence beyond areas where it has a permanent physical presence (Hansen, 2019). Elsewhere, as in Somalia, stationary courts act as magnets. People living in government-controlled areas travel 30 or 40 kilometres to reach stationary courts. Courts tend to be located in what interviewees referred to as 'court towns', which are widely known about but in areas of consolidated Al Shabaab presence. Even where a group has been pushed back or has little territorial influence, it can still influence the population remotely via these mechanisms.
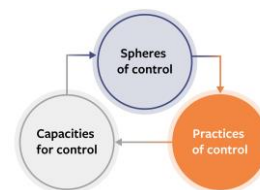
Box 5.2 Monitoring dispute resolution as an indicator of control

The ability of an armed group to establish parallel justice mechanisms, or to co-opt and manipulate existing informal dispute resolution mechanisms, is a key indicator of its intent and capability to govern the behaviour of populations.

- It is important to monitor changes in the services being offered by an armed group. Shifts from the use of mobile courts to the use of stationary courts may indicate an enhanced level of capacity as well as territorial presence. The ability to establish a stationary court indicates that, for example, the armed group is comfortable enough to set up stable structures in a given locale – even if the government or other authorities still retain a presence in the area.

- Changes in geographic coverage can also indicate increasing levels of influence. This can be looked at in several ways, for example: the spread of mobile or stationary courts, an increasing co-option of existing mechanisms, and people travelling from longer distances to access the courts. In this way, changes in the number of courts operated by an armed group can indicate changes in control.

- An uptick in people turning to armed group dispute resolution mechanisms (and/or away from customary or state mechanisms) can signal other important shifts, including increased armed group influence and presence, as well as the erosion of state legitimacy, influence and presence.

5.3 Taxation

Taxation is a crucial source of revenue and, therefore, financial capacity for armed groups. But taxation also allows armed groups to exercise control well beyond the economic sphere (see Bandula-Irwin et al., 2021; 2022). Taxation practices enable armed groups to shape the social sphere – for instance, when taxing goods or behaviour that are considered to be morally wrong, such as alcohol, cigarettes or khat. In addition, taxation is one way in which arm groups 'perform' a state-like role. The act of collecting taxes, albeit coercive, confirms the armed group's authority. In some cases, it might (arguably) confirm a certain type of social contract. Armed groups might also justify their economic practices by asserting that they are the de facto state, which in turn reinforces their authority.
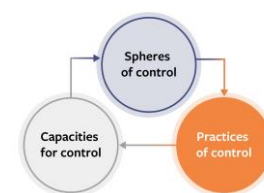
In Mali, taxes are closely linked to social hierarchies. In central Mali, the *jowro* taxation system is linked to the relationship between elites and lower classes within the Fulani, and the resentment aimed towards the elites because of it. Initially, Katiba Macina in Mopti won favour among lower-class Fulani because of its challenge to land rights that the elites controlled (Thurston, 2020; Rupesinghe and Boas, 2019). However, Katiba Macina later realised it had to bring the elites on board to control the land, so it did not ban the *jowro* taxation system but capped how much could be charged (Diall and Baldoro, 2020; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021).[20] For the most part, the lower classes accepted that this was a fairer system, but those within Katiba Macina who did not joined ISGS (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021).[21]

In areas such as taxation, JNIM is organised through more central control, compared with ISGS, which shares resources horizontally (Baldoro and Diall, 2020). This has worked against ISGS, which initially imposed a protection fee on Fulani in the Mali/Niger border area, However, after a period of time, this turned more predatory, with different amounts being imposed. This led people to question whether some of those claiming protection money were actually connected to ISGS at all.[22]

The Taliban's taxation system developed over time and became more structured with growing control. As a Taliban fighter from Balkh explained:

> We began that about five years ago when we started controlling the main highways during the time of Mullah Akhtar Mansour. During that time we set up custom collection posts and started issuing receipts for payments. We appointed special people for this who were professionals and set up an administrative system. It is true that our income was increasing. But the more control we gained, the more our expenses ballooned, hence we were constantly in need of seeking more revenue.[23]

Initially, when the Taliban could only move around at night, they would ask people to bring taxes to them. Only once they had established control during the day did they send their own officials to collect the taxes themselves. The Taliban had also strategically chosen taxes that had a high chance of voluntary compliance. The Taliban insurgency faced little competition

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[20] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[21] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[22] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[23] Interview with Taliban fighter, Balkh Province, Afghanistan, January 2022.

concerning its taxation practices, centred around *ushr* and *zakat*. Beyond these levies, people said that the Taliban did not place taxation burdens on ordinary people, and instead focused on charging business owners and traders – either in the form of *zakat* or through toll levies at checkpoints.

Armed groups tend to choose modalities that have a high chance of voluntary compliance or strong means of enforcement. This helps explain why both Al Shabaab and the Taliban adopted accepted religious concepts and practices, such as *ushr* and *zakat* – even if they stretched and adapted these concepts to their own ends. Because armed groups often use taxation to undermine the state, and because they want people to comply with the practice to extend their authority, they tend to set reasonable (or, at least, not overly exploitative) terms. In some cases, the Taliban gained legitimacy for exempting people from the payment of taxes they would otherwise demand (i.e. after a poor harvest, or exempting poor families from payment) (see Amiri and Jackson, 2022). In other words, the amount of money being generated through these practices is not the only thing that matters. It is therefore essential to monitor any erosion of state legitimacy, or any increase in perceptions of an armed group's legitimacy or levels of civilian compliance with these practices.
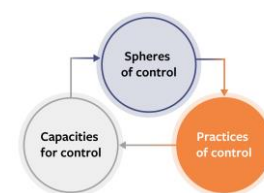
Box 5.3 Monitoring taxation as an indicator of control

- The move from ad hoc extortion to more systemic practices, such as taxation, is a key indicator of an intention to exert more systematic control over economic activity, and of the development of capacities to do this.

- The extent to which different actors (ordinary people, aid organisations, businesses) comply with an armed group's demand for taxation indicates the extent of control of an armed group. While civilians tend to resist these demands at the outset, their compliance tends to mark the consolidation of these systems as the 'cost of doing business'.

- It is critical that the penetration of taxation across industries, sectors and terrain is measured over time. Taxation of productive income and land in rural areas may be relatively easy, while taxation of major national or multinational companies or on major roads (or their arteries) is more advanced.

- Estimating an armed group's financial flows is difficult and typically unreliable, and the amount may not be as important as the presence and ability to extract revenue. So, for example, it may be more useful to monitor (via surveys or satellite imagery) the expansion or contraction of checkpoints along major transit roads (or their arteries), or to survey truck drivers on the process, amounts and frequency of demands.

- The extent to which taxes imposed by an armed group replace previously existing practices (i.e. those collected by the state, other armed groups or traditional authorities) can indicate growing control.

5.4 Regulation of movement

The regulation of civilian movement is closely linked to violent enforcement. Key practices include the establishment of checkpoints, blockades and sieges. It is helpful to think of checkpoints as lying at one end of a spectrum, being fairly easy to establish (particularly temporary or ad hoc positions) and tending to regulate rather than stop movement. Checkpoints can be used for myriad purposes, but here we are speaking of their capacity to enable searches vehicles and to stop either all or specific individuals from transiting through an area. They demonstrate physical presence and coercive power, for at least whatever amount of time the armed group can keep a checkpoint operational.

But checkpoints also undermine public trust in the government and erode perceptions of the state's ability to maintain security. People may begin to alter their behaviour in ways that they believe will keep them safe. This might mean no longer travelling with a government-issued ID or with a lot of cash, or removing items that might arouse suspicion (i.e. smartphones, cameras). They may also find ways to signal their support for the group, such as by playing certain kinds of music or wearing certain kinds of clothes.

Besiegement and blockades, at the other end of the spectrum, require significant territorial presence, organisation and coercive power. In central Mali, JNIM member Katiba Macina has used blockades to punish communities that it suspects work with government forces, and to force communities to comply with its governance system. These blockades prevent people from travelling to rural markets and their farms. The group has also established checkpoints along roads in the rural areas that they control (ICG, 2019b).

Al Shabaab has implemented similar tactics in the service of various ends. In some instances, blockades have been used to starve out government supporters and their families in Bakool to facilitate Al Shabaab's takeover of the area. In other instances, Al Shabaab has been using 'collective punishment to undermine trust in the government'.[24] In one case, the local government threatened to expel the families of Al Shabaab; in another, the government punished those who they believed used Al Shabaab courts. In both instances, the group responded with blockades. Al Shabaab's tactics stand out for the degree of disregard for collective civilian well-being. In the 2011 famine, and again in the 2017 drought, Al Shabaab orchestrated blockades that put millions at risk of starvation. That said, in some instances blockades are more selective, targeting a single commodity (i.e. fuel) or allowing people to leave to collect humanitarian assistance and then return.[25]

Forcible eviction or displacement of individuals or groups of people is another tactic used to regulate movement. Evictions and displacements tend to be more selective than blockades, indicating a high level of intelligence and coercive power in a given locale. The Taliban, for example, regularly employed individual evictions and displacements to punish opponents or those seen as potential government collaborators. Following the peace deal between the Republic and Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin faction in 2016, the Taliban forced Hizb members in Laghman Province either to renounce their Hizb affiliation or to leave. Similar incidents were reported in Ghazni around

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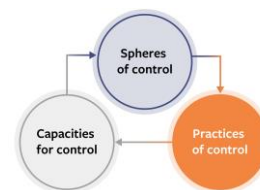
[24] Key informant interview, February 2022.
[25] Key informant interview, February 2022.

the same time.[26] From 2015 onwards, the Taliban has regularly displaced families of ISKP fighters from Nangarhar, Kunar and Jowzjan Provinces and burned their homes (see Zerai, 2019). The Taliban *layha* (code of conduct for fighters and commanders) similarly permits forced expulsion of suspected spies or those who present a perceived security threat. The message is clear: the armed group, and only the armed group, decides who lives in a certain locale, and all those who intend to stay must obey its rules.
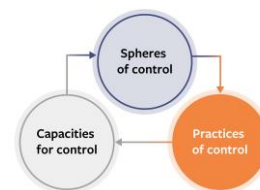
Box 5.4 Monitoring freedom of movement as an indicator of control

- Shifts in the extent to which an armed group operates checkpoints can be an indicator of the group's level of influence, and capacity for influence, over civilian movement. One example might be a change in the number or degree of stability (mobile/stationary) encountered when moving from one locale to another.

- At the macro level, shifts in where and how an armed group operates checkpoints can indicate changes in its level of control (i.e. shift from temporary to permanent checkpoints, expanded presence on a given road, a shift from transit arteries and back roads to major routes).

- The orchestration of more collective mechanisms, such as blockades and besiegement, is a clear sign of both territorial and population control. In addition, the aims of these tactics, and whether they spur effective resistance from the state, can tell us a great deal about an armed group's strategic objectives and it ability (or desire) regarding selectivity.

5.5 Regulation of access to aid and services

Armed group regulation of access to aid and essential services serves several objectives. One objective is to generate revenue. Controlling access can entail controlling the movement of aid and supplies, access to job opportunities and salaries, and the collection of taxes. An armed group may, for example, use its influence to extract direct payments, or it may ensure that jobs or contracts are awarded to its members or allies.

Another objective is to allow the armed group to demonstrate that it controls who works in a given area, who benefits from that work, and what kinds of services and benefits it will allow the population to access. Here, armed group security concerns often play a role. Al Shabaab in recent years has been deeply hesitant to engage with all but local aid providers, harbouring deep suspicion and antagonism toward many international NGOs and the United Nations. Some armed groups may attack state schools simply because they see them as an extension of their adversary, as the Taliban did early in its evolution. Armed groups being harsher to aid groups may not necessarily be a sign of strength, but rather a sign of weakness, showing that the armed group is not confident of its ability to surveil and control a potential

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[26] Drawing on one of the authors' previously unpublished research, key informant interviews in Ghazni and Laghman Provinces, February 2021.

threat. In other instances, the armed group may see certain projects or services as interfering – ideologically or practically – with its objectives.

A third objective is to enhance the armed group's self-image and legitimacy in the eyes of the population. It allows the armed group to act as the governing authority, taking key decisions about what benefits individuals or the community can access. This has the effect of, at times, inducing collaboration between the state and the armed group, creating opportunities for mutual benefit among adversaries. In Sri Lanka, LTTE accepted the continuation of state-run schools in hospitals and schools. This was described as a balance of interests between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government. The government could externally still lay claim to having some form of presence in LTTE territory, and for the LTTE it provided both healthcare and education to those within its territory (Kasfir et al., 2017). The Taliban co-opted health and education services provided by the state and NGOs, arguing that they could root out corruption and manage things even better than the incumbent state. They forced absentee teachers to show up for work, inspected medical facilities and supplies, and even pressured their government 'counterparts' to improve the quality of services (Jackson, 2018).

A shift from prohibiting to allowing access to aid can indicate larger pragmatic shifts within a movement. For example, in Mali, JNIM issued a *fatwa* in 2018 that instructed member groups to facilitate the access of humanitarian actors, rather than attacking them (ICG, 2019c). Regulating access to areas under JNIM control to humanitarian and NGO workers seems to serve two important purposes for JNIM. First, it allows populations under its control to access healthcare and basic supplies, such as food and veterinary services, which in turn may boost the popularity of JNIM. Second, by regulating the access of humanitarian and NGO workers to these areas, JNIM becomes the de facto authority in charge of humanitarian NGOs, rather than the state, which is argued to boost JNIM legitimacy (ibid.). JNIM also places restrictions on the types of programmes that may be implemented in areas it controls. While programmes related to healthcare, water and sanitation seem to be more agreeable, those related to education, family planning and maternal healthcare are not, due to conflicting with the group's ideology.[27]

Finally, some groups may also provide their own services. Hamas and Hezbollah are prominent historical examples of this. This not only helps to reinforce legitimacy (and popularity), but also tends to assist in extending social and political control and influence over populations.
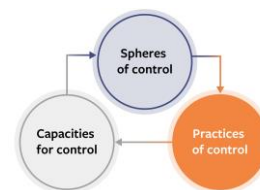
> ### Box 5.5 Monitoring access to aid and services
>
> - Armed groups tend to be less trusting of aid agencies when they are weak or at the outset, and more open to negotiating or allowing access. This is not true of all armed groups, and must be put in context, but in some instances increasing access or more stable negotiations may be markers of an armed group consolidating its control.

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[27] Key informant interview, February 2022.

- Some of these indicators might be relatively easy to track if the NGOs and service providers felt they could be open about the situation – but there are strong incentives for them not to be.

- Through independent research, however, one could commission baseline assessments focused on the degree of co-option of services, mediation by informal authorities and increasing reliance on 'community acceptance' to navigate access to areas where armed groups enact practices of control.
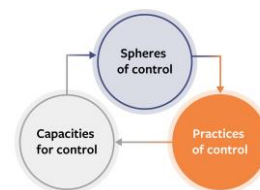
5.6 Social strictures

Most forms of social control exerted by armed groups require the group to have a high degree of territorial presence and control. Al Shabaab, for example, has a certain expansive vision of the Islamic state and society it plans to enact. But its focus on enforcing behaviours that align with that vision – such as banning female genital mutilation and khat – is concentrated in areas it broadly controls. Theoretically, it could target, for example, concerts or activities it sees as un-Islamic in government areas, much as it targets AMISOM and government actors in these areas with suicide attacks. But it chooses not to, likely because enforcing these norms outside of its areas is a lower order priority and an ineffective use of its military resources.
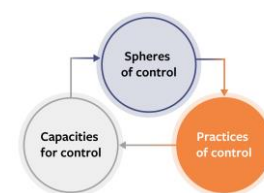
Within areas controlled by armed groups, however, social compliance with armed group restrictions becomes a visible performance of obedience. If, as one key informant suggests, armed groups are about the 'movement of the mass' – getting people to do something abnormal, to act outside of the law – then individuals, communities or society at large changing the way they act or dress is a highly visible indicator. Some armed groups implement punishments publicly, not only to discipline and humiliate the rule-breaker, but also to send a message to the broader population. At times this appeared to be an initial show of force. In the case of the Taliban, public humiliations (i.e. shaving heads, dipping people in the river, blackening faces, forcing people to ride on donkeys) drew on older or abandoned cultural practices, effectively instilling fear of being caught 'misbehaving'.

Changes in social norms and behaviours – when what was once acceptable becomes forbidden – tend to mark the consolidation of influence in a given locale. The Taliban's and Al Shabaab's social strictures are well documented, particularly around women's freedoms and gender roles. In Mali, the shift in gender roles and gendered behaviour has also been pronounced (i.e. dress code, men and women travelling separately, women being banned from working in the fields). JNIM member Katiba Macina has also banned the tattooing around the mouth that Fulani women have done once married (Rupesinghe and Diall, 2019).

There is often a considerable gender dimension to the social norms imposed. This is most certainly true with regard to the Taliban, Al Shabaab and JNIM, given their roughly similar ideological rootedness and conservative interpretations of Islam, but certainly with regard to other groups as well.[28] An important aspect of this to consider, however, is whether these changes were already taking place. For example, the systems of control that has been

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[28] For reference, see Wright (2014), Riley (2019), Kesby (1996), Bloom and Lokmanoglu (2020), Khalili (2011), Düzgün (2016) and Herath (2014).

administered by member groups of JNIM have been demonstrated through the enforcement of sharia law and strict interpretation of Islam to govern the social life of those under its control. However, a more conservative following of Islam was already taking place within Sahelian communities before the emergence of jihadist armed groups in the region (ICG, 2021). Therefore, any changes in a society need to be weighed up against wider societal changes and those which can be attributed to a given armed group.

Equally important is how an armed group might loosen these restrictions in order to enhance its influence. In some areas, Al Shabaab simply chooses not to enforce some of its less popular and more invasive restrictions, particularly those around women's movement and freedom. In at least some instances, this seems to be a part of a tactical bargain between Al Shabaab and the community: we'll grant you a degree of autonomy, so long as you allow us to move through the territory, provide intelligence when we ask for it, and do not interfere with our objectives.

For the Taliban, the role of the Vice and Virtue police has shifted considerably from its pro-2001 iteration. As an insurgency, the group tended to inhibit some behaviours more as a way to display its Islamist credentials, and therefore legitimise the insurgency, than to strictly control behaviour. In the northern provinces where fieldwork was carried out, the Taliban tended to adopt a 'preaching' style of social control, beseeching civilians to abstain from certain styles of dress or hair and facial styles. Occasionally, the group meted out punishment to those who failed to attend prayers regularly by dipping them in the river. However, by and large, in the north, the group did not appear to regulate people's beards, hairstyles or clothes, and only some of their 'less trained' members would at times harass locals over these issues.

Box 5.6 Monitoring social norms and behaviours as an indicator of control

- Changes in social norms and behaviour are incredibly hard to measure in any meaningful and quantitative way.

- Changes in behaviour, including choice of clothing, may indicate changes in armed group control. Yet lack of enforcement of social norms does not necessarily indicate an absence of control.

- Additionally, people might adjust their behaviour and align it with the norms and values propagated by an armed group long before the group has established a permanent presence. This may, in part, be a coping mechanism, as civilians try to predict short-term and end-of-war outcomes. By following the rules in advance, they 'prepare' themselves, shoring up their security and prospects of survival.

6 Capacities for control
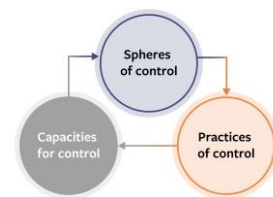
Identifying the practices of control used by an armed group helps to demonstrate the group's level of influence, but it is not sufficient on its own. It is helpful to think also about the capacities an armed group needs to enact these practices. The research suggests that three main types of capacity are the building blocks of armed group control: coercive capacities, operational capacities and financial capacities (figure 8). These capacities are closely interconnected and overlap in many ways. Capacities are the resources that enable armed groups to apply practices of control and shape different spheres of control. This, in turn, affects the capacities for control, as the cycle of control illustrates.

Figure 8   Capacities for control
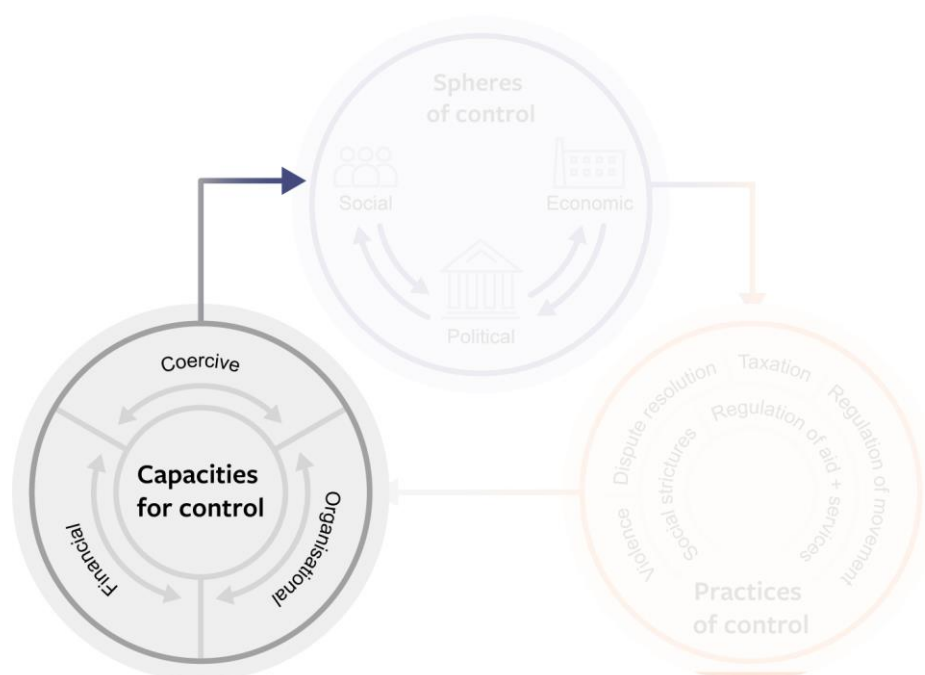
6.1   Coercive capacity

An armed group's coercive capacities are largely determined by its military power, equipment and personnel. Coercive capacity is key for a group's ability to apply different types of violence as a practice of control. At the same time, coercive capacity is also required for other practices of control, including the enforcement of taxation, justice and movement restrictions.

Recruitment is a fairly broad but useful indicator in this respect. An uptick in certain kinds of violence may mark the development of new or growing coercive capacities (i.e. IED use where a group had not previously relied on

this tactic, as was the case with the Taliban in 2006). Conversely, the killing of mid- and senior-level commanders might indicate that coercive capacities are likely to diminish or break down in certain respects.

The level of coercive agility, or the ability of an armed group to shift strategy and develop new coercive capacities in response to changes in the tactics of its adversaries, can tell us a great deal about the survival prospects of the group. This might, for example, take the form of a shift from guerrilla or other indirect tactics to direct ground attacks against the group's adversary (i.e. pitched battles, overrunning enemy fortifications or government buildings). The increasing sophistication of military offensives, such as those that demonstrate an ability to move fighters from one locale to another to launch coordinated offensives, can also be linked to organisational capacity.

Coercive capacity can also be about preventing or abstaining from violence. As much as armed groups rely on the threat of coercive force to elicit compliance from civilians, they also tend to offer protection as an incentive. They may not be able to offer full protection from retaliatory state violence, but they can often offer protection from other threats, such as banditry and criminality. Alongside this, the provision of justice and security can enhance an armed group's legitimacy, as discussed above. Additionally, perhaps the most powerful indicator of control is the ability to abstain from violence, such as declaring and adhering to a ceasefire.
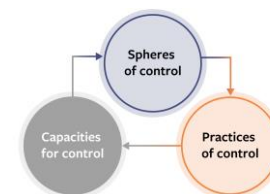
6.2   Organisational capacity

Organisational capacities describe an armed group's ability to exercise command and control within the movement. Although rather intangible, these attributes enable an armed group to translate central-level decisions, policies and strategies into consistent practices of influence and control. In some instances, they may be markers of organisational development, such as the establishment of a code of conduct. The consistency of rules across geographies (e.g. requirements for humanitarian access, targeting, accountability) and presence of a clear chain of command (e.g. the degree to which there is upward accountability, or whether there are breakdowns in command) are important markers in this respect.

In other instances, the outcomes of these capacities may be meaningful indicators, such as the actual dissemination of and adherence to the code of conduct (e.g. the level of compliance, reasons for non-compliance, punishments imposed for non-compliance). The establishment of accountability mechanisms and the degree of follow-through may be similarly helpful to track (i.e. designated punishments for rule-breaking and abuses against civilians, and follow-through in documented instances; establishment of civilian complaint mechanisms).

6.3   Financial capacity

A final set of capacities is financial, constituting an armed group's funding and access to financial resources. Access to funds is vital for an armed group's survival, as it determines its ability to cultivate cohesion and pay for

vital things like salaries, arms and ammunition, training, travel, oversight and a range of other 'organisational' functions.

Having a broad understanding of an armed group's funding base (i.e. local contributions, extortion, third party state sponsorship, diaspora, taxation, natural resources) is an important starting point, which would then enable tracking of change over time. Although hard to monitor accurately, changes in revenue amounts and sources may indicate shifts in capacity in either direction. They may also presage a shift in practices. An armed group whose third party state sponsors suddenly cut off funding may shift toward preying upon or taxing local populations. What appears to be most important is the ability to elicit predictable and dependable financial flows. Although this may happen later on in an armed group's evolution (or never at all), the existence of an internal mechanism that allows the group to coordinate revenues and distribute them according to strategic priorities is a marker of high capacity in this regard.
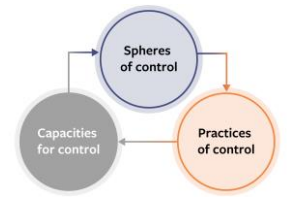
7 Conclusions

The paper illustrates that the dominant understanding of control, viewed through the lens of territory, only insufficiently captures how armed groups operate. The focus on territorial control fails to consider that control is typically not delineated according to clear dividing lines and that armed groups can often exercise control far beyond the areas in which they are physically present. A more comprehensive approach necessarily has to consider how armed groups control not just territory, but populations.

The paper suggests it is necessary to look at the full cycle of armed group control and to analyse:

- how armed groups control populations, whether in the economic, social or political sphere

- what practices armed groups apply to exercise control, including the use of violence, conflict resolution and taxation and the regulation of movement, and

- the resources that underpin armed group control, such as coercive, financial and organisational capacities.

While all three dimensions of control are complex and context-specific, we have outlined several indicators that capture both the practices of control used by armed groups and the capacities for control that underpin those practices. Applying these indicators, tailored to each specific context, can help track changes in armed group control. Particularly promising indicators include shifts in the use of different types of violence, checkpoints and dispute resolution mechanisms. Beyond practices at the community level, there is much that the international community can already learn about armed group control from their engagement with aid organisations and their regulation of aid delivery.

7.1   Areas for further research

The paper also raises a number of questions that require further comparative research across armed groups. Here we outline a number of questions raised during the research, which would not only help with the practical application of this framework, but also contribute to a wider understanding of armed group control.

- To what extent does access to foreign financial support (i.e. by states, diaspora, corporations) affect local taxation and other economic practices?

- Under what circumstances do armed groups decide to provide services such as conflict resolution or courts? What shapes and motivates these practices? What factors prevent or constrain them?

- How do civilian–armed group relations, and civilian agency more generally, shape how armed groups exert control? How do civilians navigate, or attempt to manipulate and subvert, various practices of control? Does it matter in some areas more than others, and where does civilian influence lie?

- Does the type of group inform perceptions and interpretations of spheres, practices and capacities? What typologies might be developed or applied to tell us more about how armed group control varies across contexts?

- What roles do armed group gender norms and identities play in shaping practices of control, and the rhetoric or ideological claims used to justify them?

7.2   Operationalising the framework

While the framework presented in this paper is admittedly conceptual, the next step is to begin to develop and test its application to conflicts in real time. Any effort to track control in a meaningful way must start with solid contextual and conflict analysis, with the framework providing a toolkit of sorts. One way to start this process might be to convene an **analysis workshop**, involving both internal analysts and external experts, to map the spheres of control, practices and capacities as they are seen in the current context. Informed debate and shared understanding over the aims, methods and practices of a given armed group can provide a foundation for applying these ideas in practice.

While it might be possible to flesh out an armed group's spheres of control, and to identify a range of practices that the group employs, tracking them all may prove too resource intensive. Thus, it will be important to **prioritise which indicators to track**. One challenge is, however, that these will change over time. For analysts looking at the Taliban in 2006, it may have been most relevant to track certain forms of violence, but those indicators were not necessarily the ones they needed to pay most attention to in 2021, prior to the Taliban takeover. Another limitation is feasibility, as possibly not all indicators can be tracked over time, or may require retrospective analysis to uncover patterns and shifts. A final consideration is scale, and the need to strike a balance between understanding localised patterns and macro-level trends.

With those caveats aside, the cases examined in this paper – JNIM, Al Shabaab and the Taliban – suggest that some indicators are more informative than others at various points in each of these groups' evolution.

Violence

The use of violence is a prominent and early practice of control by armed groups across the three contexts studied. Our research suggests that

context-specific indicators on how violence is used can be informative for early warning.

In Afghanistan, 2006 marked a turning point, with the Taliban gaining significant capacity to use IEDs and suicide attacks – but one which was largely ignored. With growing control, the Taliban increasingly conducted targeted assassinations and avoided claiming responsibility for attacks that caused large numbers of civilian casualties.

In central Mali, in the early phases of Katiba Macina, the group utilised violence to remove or intimidate existing symbols of authority. The group replicated this strategy as it expanded into new areas, suggesting that measuring assassinations and intimidation against certain authorities would have helped track these patterns as they unfolded.

In Somalia, the nature of violence exerted by Al Shabaab in frontline and urban areas (broadly the domain of the government) is markedly different than the kinds of violence it enacts elsewhere. In some areas, where the group feels it can strike a deal with the population, the threat of collective violence acts as an incentive for civilian compliance, suggesting that a drop in violence in some areas may indicate consolidation of Al Shabaab control.

Taxation

While armed group taxation started much later than violence in all three countries, it was a critical marker of each group's attempts to exert control. Sudden changes in patterns of taxation and the extent to which an armed group extracts taxes from the local population may indicate an evolution in the group's tactics. In central Mali, for instance, the imposition of the *zakat* does appear to have become more common over time, reflecting Katiba Macina's growing strength.

Dispute resolution and courts

How armed groups provide justice and dispute resolution can provide crucial insights into control and a foundation for early warning. Tracking fault lines within society may be key in identifying early forms of mobilisation that occur before violence. While grievances exist in all societies, it is important to monitor how these are utilised by armed groups to exert control.

In Afghanistan, people often started using Taliban courts before the movement had established territorial control, and even when the group had been pushed back territorially. It was a cheap, easy and adaptable way of responding to a clear civilian need. The presence of armed group courts can also help map the extent of infiltration. As early as 2019, Taliban courts were operating inside Kabul, not far from the embassies and government offices.

In Mali, JNIM members have used mobile courts to help project a presence beyond the areas in which they are physically present. JNIM has also used

its justice system, viewed by some to be more effective than the state system, as a means to set itself as an alternative to the state.

In Somalia, people travel sometimes up to 40 or 50 km to 'court towns' in order to seek dispute resolution. Measuring how far people are willing to travel, and estimating any changes in accessibility or audience (e.g. whether they are attracting major business owners or government officials), would have been an important indicator to track in recent years.

Changes in social norms or behaviours

While changes in the way society behaves may be quite subtle and therefore challenging to track in real time, they do form a central part of how armed groups consolidate control. This may, however, be harder to track and so may require dedicated research in a way that the other indicators outlined here do not.

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