



Policy brief

Understanding agency in civilian-armed group interactions

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Key messages

Within both the academic and policy literature, civilians are rarely seen as having significant influence over armed actors, or over conflict dynamics more broadly – but that is starting to change.

This paper explores what we know about civilian–armed group relations, and raises new questions for investigation. It urges us to think of ‘civilians’ and ‘armed groups’ as diverse, fluid and overlapping categories, and refocus our attention on how civilians exercise agency.

The paper concludes by outlining a social capital-based framework for understanding these dynamics. Future research will test and build on this framework.

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About this publication

This paper is a joint output of ODI and the Centre on Armed Groups. The Centre supports efforts to analyze and engage with armed groups to reduce violence and end armed conflict. It does so through conducting innovative research, creating spaces for dialogue, and providing advice.

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1 Introduction

An estimated 150 million people live in areas where non-state armed groups exercise some degree of control (ICRC, 2022). Yet we know relatively little about how different people navigate life amid armed groups. Within both the academic and policy literature on conflict, relations between civilians and armed groups have typically been thought of in terms of coercion, resistance, victimisation and violence. Civilians are rarely seen as having significant influence over armed actors, or over conflict dynamics more broadly. That is starting to change. Increasing attention is being paid to civilian agency, both in the study of conflict and in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding-work. In particular, recent work on rebel governance and on civilian resistance has highlighted how civilians might shape the conduct of belligerents or counter armed group influence.¹

Yet there is still a great deal that we don't know about how different types of people, across contexts and circumstances, negotiate their survival amid the presence of armed groups. This paper is the first in a broader project exploring civilian-armed group relations, and the implications for policy and programmatic interventions. Drawing on the existing literature, as well as consultations with researchers and practitioners, it summarises existing debates and proposes a way forward for thinking differently about civilian-armed group relations. The paper begins with a discussion of 'civilians' as a category and the kinds of options available to different civilians. It then looks at the factors that shape how they engage (or not) with armed groups.

¹ See, for example, Arjona, 2016; Barnes, 2022; Brenner, 2017; Kalyvas, 2006; Kaplan, 2017; Krause, 2018; Krause et al., forthcoming; Mac Ginty, 2021; Mampilly, 2011; Mampilly and Stewart, 2020; Masullo, 2021; Suarez, 2017.

2 Civilian agency and options

Most civilians would probably prefer to avoid armed groups altogether, but they may not have that choice. Some people flee in response to a growing armed group presence (or the violence they enact). Others might take up arms against the group or may join the group, and those that join might be driven by a range of different interests and pressures. Typically, however, most civilians who remain in areas where armed groups exert influence must still engage with those groups. They typically do this out of necessity, and still try to minimise their interactions with armed groups. Regardless of the type of group involved (e.g. criminal, insurgent, etc.), an important starting point is to recognise that civilians' options in these circumstances are often deeply constrained.

From the perspective of an armed group, controlling populations is crucial and considerably more important than the control of territory (Bahiss et al., 2022). Armed groups typically need to control civilian behaviour to both feel safe and achieve their objectives (Joshi and Quinn, 2017; Bahiss et al., 2022). They must ensure that civilians do not inform on them, and behave in other ways that support their survival and broader objectives (e.g. providing food and shelter and conforming with their rules and ideology).

Armed groups use a range of practices to get civilians to comply with their demands. Chief among these are violence and coercion. In addition, some draw on community perceptions of injustice and marginalisation as part of their efforts to build legitimacy (Weigand, 2022). Others develop 'state-like' governance functions and structures that enable an armed group to exercise control over people (Arjona, 2016; Mampilly and Stewart, 2020). More powerful groups are all but unavoidable, controlling civilian movement, extracting taxes or other rents, regulating access to services and so on.

Even in these circumstances, empirical studies suggest that outright civilian or community support for armed groups is rare (Shesterinina, 2016; Lichtenheld, 2020). One study estimated that active participants in any given rebellion comprised around 5% of the population (Lichbach, 1995). Any armed actor, whether a non-state group or a government, is likely to punish those it suspects of supporting its adversaries. In more fractured conflicts, civilians may also risk punishment from multiple armed actors. There are few good options. The literature suggests that they must assess the least risky (and most beneficial) course of action and weigh that against who is more likely to punish them (see Mason and Fett, 1996). Yet, we know it is even more complex than this in real life, amid imperfect information, fear and uncertainty.

All of that said, characterising civilians risks overlooking their agency in these interactions. A range of more recent studies on civilian behaviour has illustrated how civilians use their agency creatively, and that they have the power to influence the behaviour of armed groups (Arjona, 2017; Kaplan, 2017; Suarez, 2017; Jackson, 2021). Further, we know that different people's motives are often overlapping and complex, and interpreting their behaviour is not necessarily a straightforward exercise. For example, some people profit from their relations with armed groups, or try to manipulate armed groups to further their interests (e.g., to settle scores or to gain an economic advantage). Yet, how people perceive and make choices in wartime – as well as the options open to them – seems to heavily depend on who they are.

3 Beyond binaries: civilians and armed as complex categories

Civilians are not a homogenous category, although they are often treated as such in international law, as well as within the academic study of war (Kinsella, 2011; Sutton, 2021). It is worth noting that members of armed groups are also not homogenous, and in many instances interpersonal relationships between a given ‘civilian’ and ‘armed actor’ shape the microdynamics of the conflict at the local level. Civilians and armed groups – at least where they are locally embedded – are enmeshed in the same social fabric: they are family members, old schoolmates, acquaintances and so on. Family relations and friendships can tightly link armed groups to civilian social structures and, as such, the lines between passive and active support for an armed group are often blurred. (This is, of course, not always the case; where fighters or other armed actors come from outside the community, for instance, there may be different kinds of interactions, marked by a different kind of hostility and suspicion.)

Certain kinds of elites, such as business elites or customary authorities, may possess greater bargaining power vis-à-vis armed groups by virtue of their economic and social power. Shire’s recent work explores how Somali clan elders assumed a key diplomatic role in the absence of a unified state authority, brokering truces and acting as interlocutors between the Federal government and Al-Shabaab (Shire, 2021). Van Baalen argues that elites in Côte d’Ivoire with strong clientelist networks were able to pressure armed groups and mobilise resistance more effectively (van Baalen, 2021). In Afghanistan, Jackson finds that elders tried – with varying levels of success – to collectively bargain with the Taliban on behalf of their communities (Jackson, 2021). At the same time, conflict may upend traditional power structures and create new forms of hierarchy based on those with influence over armed groups.

Elites, as well as ‘ordinary’ people, draw on a range of financial, cultural and social resources in their day-to-day interactions with armed groups. Class, ethnicity, tribe or family, gender, identity, friendships, the communities they are part of, or even who they went to school with, might all contribute to shaping an individual’s links to and bargaining power with an armed group. As Bourdieu (2020) argues, these forms of power can also be seen as types of capital or resources – economic, sociopolitical, cultural – that influence how civilians engage and how successful they are. But these types of power cannot be divorced from their context and the social practices through which people exercise their influence. Moreover, as other scholars of social capital have argued, the ‘negotiating power’ they create varies according to a range of constraining and enabling factors linked to the wider context (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2001).

Examining how different civilians exercise power, and the circumstances in which they do so, can help us to better understand how different people navigate threats of violence and attempt to influence how violence is wielded. Thinking about different kinds of power also allows us

to examine the internal diversity of ‘civilians’ as a category – one made up of individuals and coalitions who draw on different resources and tactics in their everyday interactions with armed groups. Critically, they also have diverse reasons for engaging – or avoiding engagement – with armed groups.

At the same time, it is also important to see ‘armed groups’ as similarly composed of individuals with diverse roles, interests, beliefs, positions, experiences and narratives they have been exposed to. Hence, armed groups may follow different agendas and have varying levels of interest in local-level legitimacy (see Reno, 2015; Weigand, 2022). Armed groups’ capacity for violence unquestionably gives them significant power over civilians, but they too use certain forms of non-violent capital to influence civilians (e.g., in their propaganda, in how they justify their cause and appeal to civilians, in their governance practices) (Bolt, 2012).

4 Explaining engagement: drivers of civilian–armed group interaction

The empirical literature points to many instances in which engaging with armed groups is part of everyday survival (Barter, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Suarez, 2017; Ginty, 2021; Rupesinghe et al., 2021). And we know that civilians pursue a range of objectives through these interactions. Here we break these down into three broad categories: security, services and advantages.

Civilians may engage, individually or collectively, on security or protection issues. These range from trying to reduce the armed group’s violence or mitigate the harm that the armed group would otherwise inflict. This could include negotiating the release of captive relatives, pushing back on forcible recruitment or pushing back on the military occupation of schools or clinics. Armed groups may also prioritise security provision as a way of building legitimacy among civilian communities. In Mali, jihadist groups built legitimacy by providing security from cattle raiding and banditry (Rupesinghe et al., 2021). In other cases, civilians may actively prefer the protection of armed groups to that of states, particularly when that state is particularly violent or predatory (Kasfir, 2015).

While armed groups provide access to services (or where they obstruct access to services), civilians try to shape armed group behaviour and policy. In Aceh province in Indonesia, for instance, religious leaders negotiated with the Free Aceh Movement to influence forms of governance in areas such as education (Barter, 2015). In instances where the group takes on de facto state functions they may benefit from some of the services the armed group provides. This may be as basic as the provision of stability or extend to a kind of social contract (Podder, 2017; Revkin and Ahram, 2017).

As mentioned above, some civilians seek to gain an advantage through negotiation with armed groups (Goodhand, 2004; Rangelov and Theros, 2012; Ahmad, 2015; Amiri and Jackson, 2022;). In some instances, individuals might try to gain access to jobs or economic benefits – or use their links to armed groups to sabotage their rivals. Some work suggests that this is particularly pronounced among business actors, who are seeking an economic advantage. In Somalia, for example, some business elites supported Islamist groups because of their ability to provide cheaper, more reliable security than rival groups (Ahmad, 2015). Other literature suggests that some business actors are simply interested in doing what they can to enhance their survival prospects in a volatile environment (Hoffman and Lange, 2016).

5 Means of engagement: factors shaping civilian–armed group interaction

Our starting point has been to assume that civilians have a range of options in any given situation. We also know that their options, like their behaviour, are dynamic. Both are shaped by an ongoing process through which armed groups and civilians continually contest and renegotiate the boundaries of armed group control and civilians' roles.

Figure 1 Spectrum of civilian options



If we think about these options in terms of a spectrum, resistance and non-cooperation might lie at one end. Overt resistance tends to be rare and risky (e.g., refusing armed groups' demands or taking up arms against them). More subversive forms of non-compliance indirectly undermine armed group objectives. Scott famously described this kind of behaviour as 'foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth', arguing that 'thousands upon thousands of individual acts of insubordination and evasion create a political or economic barrier reef of their own' (Scott, 1985: 29-36).

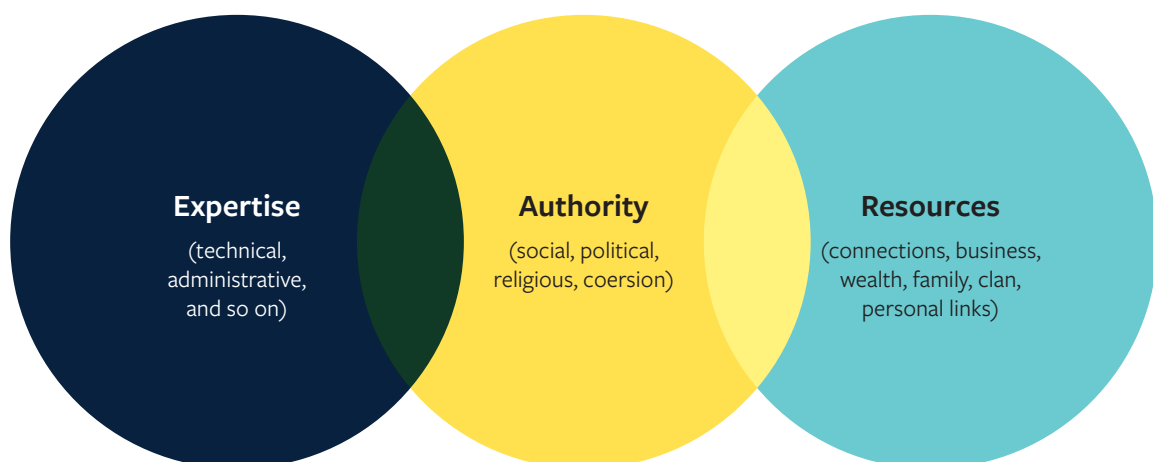
In the middle of the spectrum lie various options that might be termed compliance. This includes various forms of negotiation and dialogue. One of the more common tactics is collective bargaining. Customary authorities, as mentioned above, can promise the collective compliance of a community in return for the armed group meeting their demands. Civilians, when united, may be able to persuade armed groups to allow them to maintain their institutions or to incorporate community interests into the armed group's objectives (Kasfir, 2015).

Some allow themselves to be coopted into armed group governance structures, as in the case of the Tigray People's Liberation Front in Ethiopia, where health workers and administrators played a key role and came to be regarded as fighters (Podder, 2017). Similarly, in Korhogo in Côte d'Ivoire, armed groups worked with civilians to provide public goods and develop clear processes of

communication to build legitimacy among the civilian population (Forster, 2015). Kasfir suggests that these kinds of interactions can oblige rebels to compromise their ideological preferences as they ‘learn on the job’ (Kasfir, 2015: 41).

But what determines the degree of influence a civilian might have, and how do they mobilize that influence? The empirical literature suggests such a diverse range of circumstances and outcomes that it is difficult to draw broad conclusions. One way forward may be to think about civilian power in terms of different forms of capital. We can then see it as encompassing all of the connections and resources that an individual or group is endowed with or has the potential to create. Social capital, for instance, describes the connections and networks people have, enabling them to achieve their objectives based on personal relations. Social capital depends on the extent of someone’s network, the types of people the person is connected to and the strength and character of these links. Other forms might include specific types of expertise (e.g., in administration, education and healthcare), social or political authority (religious or secular) or financial and business resources (this may be straightforward economic capital but also things like the social connections that ensure the continued supply of goods).

Figure 2 Potential sources of civilian social capital



Related to this, what determines the kinds of actions civilians take? Much of the existing literature overlooks how emotion and risk tolerance shape people’s behaviour. Sharply conflicting findings in the field suggest that individual risk tolerance is shaped by an array of factors too diverse to account for in a conflict setting (Eckel and Grossman, 2002; Dohmen et al., 2011; Voors et al., 2012; Callen et al., 2014; Moya, 2018). Emotion, particularly anger and fear, tends to shape behaviour in unpredictable ways (Petersen, 2002; Lindner, 2006; Halperin and Schwartz, 2010). Yet, Wood’s work on El Salvador and Jackson’s in Afghanistan suggest that exercising agency in itself may fulfil certain needs, providing dignity and a sense of autonomy in an otherwise repressive environment (Wood, 2003; Jackson, 2021).

6 Conclusion

This paper has outlined what we know – and what we don't know – about relations between civilians and armed groups, and has raised several questions for further research. To be sure, there is little utility in seeing these interactions in binary terms. The realities on the ground are far messier, and we have argued that a more holistic, contextual and complicated understanding of these dynamics is required.

This paper has outlined a conceptual framing, drawing primarily on ideas of social capital, which aims to address some of these challenges. Future research will test and build on this framework. We hope this work will help answer some of the questions we have posed here, particularly around the factors that shape modes of civilian engagement with armed groups – as well as the factors that shape how armed actors engage with and treat civilians. In particular, we aim to better understand what resources civilians draw on to increase their leverage vis-à-vis armed groups, and to explore the practical implications.

The bottom line is that a more nuanced understanding of civilian–armed group dynamics is needed, not only in academia and research circles but also for those working across the peacebuilding-, humanitarian, development and diplomatic spectrum. This is why more empirical work, conducted across different contexts and taking care to pay attention to civilians (and members of armed groups), is important. Improving our understanding of civilian agency and power is essential to alleviating suffering and addressing the drivers of conflict.

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