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## **Gentle Warlords: The Potential for Violent Non-State Actors to Provide Stability**

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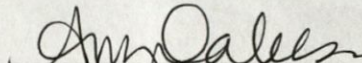
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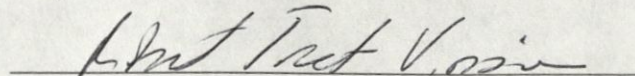
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# Gentle Warlords: The Potential for Violent Non-State Actors to Provide Stability

Tyler Bembenek

In 2003, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), a brutal insurgent group widely known for committing gross human rights violations, expanded its campaign into Uganda's Teso and Lango sub-regions. The local Ugandan military presence was not strong enough to counter the offensive, and the security of the wider region—as well as the safety of the civilian population—was severely threatened. In response, the Ugandan government authorized the formation of two communal defense forces to be drawn from the local population. The resultant 'Arrow Boys' and 'Rhino Brigade' militias were formed around specific local ethnic groups, the Iteso and Lango respectively. Using ethnic identities to mobilize the militias allowed the state to tap into preexisting organizational structures and thus raise the defense forces as quickly and easily as possible.

The militias succeeded in driving back the LRA, particularly in the Teso sub-region. However, the government's communal defense program backfired dramatically. The ethnic call to arms used to raise the militias had the adverse effect of heightening inter-ethnic tensions. The Acholi ethnic group, from which the LRA had drawn many recruits, was purposely targeted by Iteso and Lango soldiers, leading to the deaths of many civilians and causing further chaos. Thus,

although the government's policy reversed the LRA advance, it also created significant instability.<sup>1</sup>

According to the extant scholarly literature, it is unsurprising that Uganda's militias had a detrimental effect on stability. A significant body of research has explored the destabilizing tendencies of violent non-state actors (VNSAs), a loose category used to describe any organized armed group that is not part of a regular military force. Recent studies have demonstrated how VNSAs incite ethnic violence, undermine rule of law, and disrupt democratization processes. Many of these scholars have also examined how irregular armed groups enable cronyism and curtail economic development. These studies find that, in many scenarios, the presence of VNSAs hinders effective governance, threatening national stability and prosperity.<sup>2</sup>

However, there are counterexamples, such as the Syrian Kurdish militias fighting ISIS, which suggests that some VNSAs can positively affect stability.<sup>3</sup> For many societies, irregular armed forces have played an important role in providing security. In U.S. history, militias were crucial for securing the defense of the Thirteen Colonies, protecting the civilian population from American Indian and French attacks. Modern states continue to rely on VNSAs to provide stability, the most visible example of which is the increasing security role of vigilantes in

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Omach, "Political Violence in Uganda: the Role of Vigilantes and Militias," *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies* 35, no. 4 (winter 2010); A. Byaruhanga Rukooko, "Protracted Civil War, Civil Militias and Political Transition in Uganda since 1986," in *Civil Militia: Africa's Intractable Security Menace?*, ed. David J. Francis (Ashgate, 2005), 213-230.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, introduction to *Civil Militia*, 1-30; Istifanus Zabadi, "Civil Militias: Threats to National and Human Security in West Africa," in *Civil Militia*, 117-130; Cage Banseka, "The 'Anti-Gang' Civil Militias in Cameroon and the Threat to National and Human Security," in *Civil Militia*, 161-186; Macharia Munene, "Mayi Mayi and Interahamwe Militias: Threats to Peace and Security in the Great Lakes Region," in *Civil Militia*, 231-250; Jeremy Ginifer and Hooman Peimani, "Civil Defense Forces and Post-Conflict Security Challenges: International Experience and Implications for Africa," in *Civil Militia*, 251-280.

<sup>3</sup> Mutlu Civioglu, "How Kurdish Militias Have Successfully Fought Off the Islamic State," *Vice News*, 14 August 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/how-kurdish-militias-have-successfully-fought-off-the-islamic-state> (15 April 2015).

northern Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> The question then is why some VNSAs create stability while others lead to greater conflict and insecurity.

I argue that a VNSA's effect on stability is dependent on two variables: the group's *organization type* and its *relative strength*. Organization type—clientelist, communal, or corporate—determines how the actor motivates its members, funds operations, and ultimately the objectives it pursues. The second variable, relative strength, indicates how militarily powerful the group is compared to other VNSAs and the local government. I hypothesize, for example, that corporate actors, those organized around a shared but non-ascriptive identity, such as membership in a guild or society, generally behave in a manner that is most likely to create stability. Because they profit primarily from the practice of their trade, not the activities of war, corporate actors tend to be minimally abusive of the civilian population and cause very little local instability. Similarly, because they are not mobilized around ascriptive identities, such as specific religious or ethnic groups, corporate actors avoid the dangerous identity politics that contribute to higher-level societal instability. These positive attributes should hold true whether a corporate actor is relatively weak or relatively strong. As a corporate actor grows in relative strength, it can push back hostile, destabilizing VNSAs without itself becoming a source of instability.

To illustrate this argument, I examine the case of the Civil Defense Forces (CDF), a confederation of traditional hunting societies, which played an instrumental role in Sierra Leone's 1991-2002 civil war.<sup>5</sup> The CDF is an important case because it defies expectations for how VNSAs behave. Despite becoming the most powerful armed group in Sierra Leone over the

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<sup>4</sup> Will Ross, "Boko Haram crisis: Among the Vigilantes of north-east Nigeria," *BBC News*, 3 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-30291040> (14 April 2015).

<sup>5</sup> The CDF is often referred to as the Kamajors, the largest and best known of the CDF's four major subgroups. Each subgroup was associated with a specific ethnicity; the Kamajors represented only the Mende soldiers within the larger CDF organization.

course of the war, it committed relatively few abuses and never sought political power. Instead, the CDF defeated its predatory VNSA rivals, creating stability and protecting the democratically elected government.

This paper has five parts. First, I review the existing literature on violent non-state actors, arguing that current scholarship either simply categorizes VNSAs or it explains the behavior of a single type of actor, but does not explain variation in behavior across types of VNSAs. Second, I present a theory of VNSA behavior and hypothesize how organization type, in combination with the actor's relative strength, influence how such groups affect stability on a local and societal level. Third, I present my research design. Fourth, I explore one of my key hypotheses with an in-depth examination of the Civil Defense Forces during the Sierra Leone Civil War. Finally, I discuss the policy implications of my findings and conclude with suggestions for further research.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature on violent non-state actors can be divided into two camps. In the first camp, scholars have focused on categorizing VNSAs and describing their general characteristics. While showcasing the great diversity of VNSA types, these studies do not offer a general explanation for the behavior of these groups. In the second camp, scholars have created general theories of VNSA behavior, frequently emphasizing the importance of resources and economic decision-making. However, this literature often treats all VNSAs as the same, neglecting the variability of VNSA types and their wide divergence in behavior. In contrast, this paper advances the literature by creating a model of violent non-state actor behavior that also recognizes and

incorporates the diversity of VNSA types. Each literature will be discussed in greater depth below.

The first body of literature focuses on creating a typology of violent non-state actors.<sup>6</sup> Of particular note is Phil Williams's article, "Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security," which provides a list of VNSAs and their basic characteristics, including actors such as warlords, gangs, and militias.<sup>7</sup> Williams shows that VNSAs vary widely in terms of motivation, funding, and other features. In categorizing the different types of VNSAs, he suggests some economic rationales for predatory and destabilizing VNSA behavior. However, Williams does not explain why various types of VNSAs face different economic incentives. Furthermore, the paper omits any discussion of the potentially stabilizing effects of VNSAs.

Similarly, Shultz, Farah, and Lochard offer a typology of armed groups, which includes insurgents, terrorists, militias, and organized crime syndicates.<sup>8</sup> As with Williams, the authors detail the various characteristics of different VNSA types, including leadership, ideology, and operational doctrine. While the article concedes that collaboration may be possible between states and some VNSAs, such as the Afghan Northern Alliance, it provides no overarching theory for VNSA behavior and thus no argument for which VNSAs would be suitable partners for states.

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<sup>6</sup> A number of other authors have made distinctions between VNSAs types, if not explicit typologies. See, for example, Andersen, Møller, and Stepputat's introduction to *Fragile States and Insecure People? Violence, Security, and Statehood in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Louise Andersen, Bjørn Møller, and Finn Stepputat (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007). Within the same volume, Ken Menkhaus' article, "Local Security Systems in Somali East Africa" makes a distinction between 'warlords' (what this article would term clientelist VNSAs) and business-created militias (corporate VNSAs). Similarly, William Reno's article, "Protectors and Predators: Why is There a Difference among West African Militias" identifies religious and ethnic-based VNSAs (communal VNSAs) as distinct from purely patronage-based ones (clientelist VNSAs).

<sup>7</sup> Phil Williams, "Violent Non-State Actors and National and International Security," International Relations and Security Network, Center for Security Studies, *Swiss Federal Institute of Technology* (ETH Zurich), 2008, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=93880> (14 April 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Richard H. Schultz, Douglas Farah, and Itamara V. Lochard, "Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority," *USAF Institute for National Security Studies*, United States Air Force, September 2004, <http://www.usafa.edu/df/inss/OCP/ocp57.pdf> (14 April 2015).

In the second body of literature, several scholars have developed theories of VNSA behavior, often by focusing on the economic decision-making of such groups as they seek to mobilize funds and recruits.<sup>9</sup> For example, Chojnacki and Branovic explain how the central goal of VNSAs is to ensure their survival by strengthening their ability to finance their operations, often through the control of territory.<sup>10</sup> Within a territory, the probability of predatory versus stabilizing behavior depends on what the authors call a “market of violence,” as well as the actor’s material and geographical structure. Thus, Chojnacki and Branovic argue that a VNSA’s choice between peaceful resource extraction and destructive plundering is in fact an economic decision. However, while acknowledging that a group’s ‘material structure’ is important, the article does not distinguish among various VNSA types or explain why or how their corresponding material structure affects VNSA decision-making and behavior.

Louise Andersen employs a similar economic theory.<sup>11</sup> Emphasizing the high material cost of armed conflict, she explains how VNSAs acquire resources through taxation, drug production, and other means. Andersen’s core concept is the idea of the “neopatrimonial state” in which politics are driven by patronage. Within these societies, “big men”—that is, wealthy and powerful individuals who redistribute resources to their support base—reign supreme. These individuals, and their corresponding VNSAs, are in constant conflict over the resources needed to fund their patronage networks. Although providing a thorough analysis of clientelist politics, Andersen’s paper does not explain non-patronage based VNSAs, such as communal militias.

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<sup>9</sup> See, in addition, William Reno’s “Patronage Politics and the Behavior of Armed Groups.” *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 324-342, and Andreas Mehler’s, “Oligopolies of violence in Africa south of the Sahara,” *Nord-Süd Aktuell*, 3<sup>rd</sup> quartile 2004. Alternatively, several articles provide theories for VNSA behavior that are not based, at least primarily, on economic logic. See Bartolomei, Casebeer, and Thomas’ “Modeling Violent Non-State Actors: A Summary of Concepts and Methods,” *Institute for Information Technology Applications*, United States Air Force Academy, November 2004, [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usafa/modeling\\_vnsa.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usafa/modeling_vnsa.pdf) (14 April 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Sven Chojnacki and Jeljko Branovic, “The Violent Making and Unmaking of Governance in War-Torn Areas of Limited Statehood,” in *Governance without a State?*, ed. Thomas Risse (Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Louise Andersen, “What to Do? The Dilemmas of International Engagement in Fragile States,” in *Fragile States and Insecure People?*.



This paper classifies a wide range of VNSAs, while also identifying which groups are most likely to enhance stability. Unlike existing typologies, I examine how VNSAs sustain themselves in terms of manpower and resources, sorting them into three distinct organization types: clientelist, communal, and corporate.<sup>12</sup> Because these categories are based on an economic rationale, they are compatible with existing economic theories for VNSA behavior. When combined with relative strength, which determines the maximum effect a VNSA can have on stability, these factors together form a model of VNSA behavior. This model explains the mechanics of why VNSAs act in either a stabilizing or destabilizing manner, while also recognizing variation among VNSA organization types.

#### A MODEL OF VNSA BEHAVIOR

This section presents a theoretical framework that explains how, as well as the degree to which, violent non-state actors affect stability. First, I present a typology of VNSA organization types, dividing extra-legal armed groups into three categories: clientelist, communal, and corporate. Second, I explain how these types of actors have different means of sustaining their resources and manpower, characteristics that ultimately determine their organization's objectives. Third, I discuss how the relative strength of VNSAs determines their ability to pursue their objectives. Finally, I discuss my model of VNSA behavior, demonstrating how organization type and relative strength together shape a group's overall effect on stability.

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<sup>12</sup> A method recommended by DCAF and Geneva in "Armed Non-State Actors: Current Trends and Future Challenges," DCAF Horizon Working Paper Series, no. 5 (2015), as well as, less directly, Andreas Mehler, "Oligopolies of violence in Africa south of the Sahara."

## VNSA Organization Type

Non-state actors can be classified according to their organization type: clientelist, communal, and corporate. This distinction is determined by the core identity around which the group is organized. In turn, these divergent organizational structures affect how a VNSA acquires manpower and resources as well as the objectives it pursues.

### *Clientelist VNSAs*

Clientelist actors, such as the forces of Tajik Colonel Mahmud Khudayberdiev, are organizations in which the participants have no connection beyond their shared service to the group.<sup>13</sup> These VNSAs are typically labeled as “warlord” factions and include groups such as bands of brigands or mercenaries. At the core of these groups are “big men”: warlords, local aristocracy, and other powerful individuals who use the organization to enhance their own wealth and influence.<sup>14</sup> While members of a clientelist VNSA may be drawn exclusively from a single ethnic or religious community, these identities are secondary. Instead, it is participation in the organization’s patronage system which defines membership. Because they share no bonds, the members of a clientelist VNSA do not promote any sort of collective good. Instead, recruitment and membership are driven by a mix of material compensation and coercion. Material compensation, in particular, is crucial for the organization’s survival; without material incentives, the group’s foot soldiers would defect. This compensation can be passed down as

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<sup>13</sup> Troy Thomas and Stephen Kiser, “Lords of the Silk Route: Violent Non-State Actors in Central Asia,” *USAF Institute for National Security Studies*, United States Air Force, May 2002, <http://www.usafa.edu/df/inss/ocp/ocp43.pdf> (15 April 2015); Abbas Djavadi, “Tajikistan: Government Includes Strongman on Negotiating Team,” *Radio Free Europe*, 9 February 1997, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1083754.html> (15 April 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Andersen, “What to Do?”

money through patronage channels, but is also frequently provided in the form of war spoils, illicit goods, and a license to pillage.

Clientelist actors provide few of their own resources and instead rely on extracting income from external sources. This income can be in the form of taxes imposed on the population, plundering rival territory, siphoning off public funds, and stealing aid donations. These resources are used to buy supplies and equipment, but are equally vital for compensating members.

### *Communal VNSAs*

Communal groups are formed around a shared ascriptive identity, often a specific ethnic, religious, or geographic community. These VNSAs include organizations such as the Kurdish YPG in Syria and the Muslim-Arab Janjaweed in Sudan. Unlike clientelist actors, communal groups recruit and maintain membership primarily through identity politics. Foot soldiers are enlisted to promote the collective good of the greater community. Members are rewarded for their service by the collective, sometimes with material compensation, but primarily through increased influence and prestige. However, because communal actors are formed around ascriptive identities, they are subject to a powerful in-group, out-group dynamic. Members are expected to act towards the exclusive benefit of their community even at the expense of others, creating a zero-sum environment.

Communal groups are usually internally funded, drawing resources from their own constituencies. Furthermore, with less need for material incentives, recruiting soldiers is relatively inexpensive. The community produces enough goods and income to provide for its militia, even if it often cannot acquire sophisticated weaponry.

### *Corporate VNSAs*

Corporate actors are formed around a non-ascriptive identity, such as membership in a common association or profession. These VNSAs primarily consist of guilds and societies, groups whose preexisting organizational structure enables them to easily create a collective action force.<sup>15</sup> Participants in corporate VNSAs are either members of the guilds themselves or hired help. In either case, they are acting out of self-interest and expect to be compensated through the profits of their particular trade. The Bakassi Boys in southeastern Nigeria are an example of a corporate militia; they are paid, supported, and organized by local market guilds.<sup>16</sup> As with clientelist actors, corporate groups sometimes draw their members exclusively from a single ethnic or religious community, but these communal identities do not define membership and are not the group's primary motivating force.

Corporate actors rely on a mix of internal and external funding. If they organize around a revenue-producing institution, such as an industrial guild, then the practice of their trade generates income. However, this income is dependent on external sources, individuals who supply their inputs and purchase their product. Thus, even revenue-producing corporate VNSAs are not entirely self-sufficient. Non-revenue-producing groups are even more reliant on external funding from civilians and other sponsors. Nonetheless, because corporate foot soldiers are fighting for a collective good that will ultimately benefit themselves, they require less direct material compensation than clientelist soldiers.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce Baker, "Nonstate Providers of Everyday Security in Fragile African States," in *Fragile States*.  
Kenneth Omeje, "The Egbesu and Bakassi Boys: African Spiritism and the Mystical Re-traditionalisation of Security," in *Civil Militia*.

**Table 1: Typology of Violent Non-State Actors**

	<i>Clientelist</i>	<i>Communal</i>	<i>Corporate</i>
Core identity	None	Ascriptive	Non-ascriptive
Means of retaining membership	Material compensation	Communal obligations	Self-interest
Source of revenue	External extraction	Internal support	Mixed

*VNSA Objectives*

Thus, the core identity around which a VNSA is formed plays a crucial role in determining how the organization sustains its membership and revenue. However, a group’s core identity, in combination with the methods by which it sustains itself, also determines the organization’s collective objectives and its means to achieving them.

Organized primarily around a desire for material gain, clientelist actors, above all else, seek to profit from force of arms. However, to maintain their ranks, and thus their power, they need a steady flow of income to compensate their soldiers and prevent them from defecting. Because they themselves generate no income, they achieve their objectives by maximizing the amount of resources they can extract from external sources. In turn, this means that they must control wealth-producing assets, such as raw resource extraction sites, commercial transit routes, or the population itself. These sites are jealously guarded against competitors and fully exploited, often through heavy taxation, to generate maximum revenue.<sup>17</sup> This extraction may be carried out in a highly organized manner, particularly by more professional mercenary groups, but,

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<sup>17</sup> Andersen, “What to Do?.”

depending on the internal discipline of the VNSA, it is often more chaotic.<sup>18</sup> In the less disciplined groups, a common means of compensating foot soldiers is by authorizing their members to pillage and loot local communities.

Organized around a specific ascriptive identity, communal actors seek to defend and empower their constituency. The means of achieving this objective are to increase their relative strength, either by bolstering themselves or weakening their potential rivals. To do so, they must claim sources of power and resources for their community. Crucially, because communal VNSAs rely almost entirely on internal support and funding from their constituency, their prosperity does not depend on the goodwill of external actors. In fact, communal groups are incentivized to appropriate as many wealth-producing assets as possible and concentrate them solely in the hands of their own constituency. By dominating the sources of power, communal groups can bolster their own defenses, while keeping other actors too weak to pose a threat.<sup>19</sup>

Corporate soldiers are collectively motivated to profit from their trade. To do so, they must remove obstacles to their profession or lifestyle as quickly and efficiently as possible. Other groups that pose a threat or impose costs on their trade will be driven back, deterred, and neutralized. Because their professions are reliant on broad external support rather than a specific constituency, corporate VNSAs are incentivized to maintain, if not cordial, at least neutral relationships with outside communities.

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<sup>18</sup> William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999). For an example of a more professional extractive policy, see the role of Executive Outcomes, a South African mercenary corporation that was active in the Sierra Leone Civil War.

<sup>19</sup> Chojnacki and Branovic, "The Violent Making and Unmaking of Governance."

**Table 2: VNSA Objectives**

	<i>Clientelist</i>	<i>Communal</i>	<i>Corporate</i>
Collective objective	Profit from force of arms	Defend constituency	Profit from trade, profession, or lifestyle
Means of achieving objective	Maximize extraction from external sources	Claim resources for community, keep other groups weak	Remove barriers to trade, profession, or lifestyle

### **VNSA Relative Strength**

No VNSA operates in a vacuum. Instead, they must contend with other armed groups as well as government forces. Sometimes these organizations cooperate, but more often they are competing or hostile.<sup>20</sup> Relative strength—that is, the comparative military power of a VNSA—determines the means by and extent to which it can pursue its objectives. The greater a group’s relative strength, the greater its capability to inflict destabilizing violence and economic exploitation—or prevent other VNSAs from doing so. This factor is equally important for all VNSA types.

### **Predicting VNSA Behavior**

VNSAs behave in a stability-inducing or stability-degrading manner depending on the objectives they pursue and their process of achieving them. However, their ability to actually affect stability is contingent on their relative strength. Simply put, strong actors have a greater potential effect on stability, whereas weak groups have very little ability to influence stability either positively or negatively.

Stability comprises two components, local stability and societal stability. Local stability constitutes the everyday security of individuals within the geographic area where a VNSA is

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<sup>20</sup> Mehler, “Oligopolies of Violence.”

present. Acts of theft, forced dispossession, and physical violence, among others, all diminish local stability. In contrast, societal stability assesses the relationships between national demographic groups, measured on a nation-wide basis. Sectarian or ethnic tension—or, in more extreme cases, open conflict—decreases societal stability.

### *The Behavior of Clientelist VNSAs*

At a very weak relative strength, clientelist actors have a minimal impact on stability, either local or societal. In order to fund their war effort and their own material needs, foot soldiers will prey upon the nearby civilian population, looting their property and dispossessing them of valuables.<sup>21</sup> However, the group is too weak to overcome significant resistance, so even their ability to assault relatively defenseless communities is limited.

As the VNSA grows in relative strength, it will overcome village defense forces and its weaker rivals, adding more resources and territory to exploit. This extraction is often violent, dramatically decreasing local stability. Instability is particularly rife in recently captured areas where discipline has not yet been established and reprisals against captured rivals are common. If the affected area becomes sufficiently large, societal instability will also start to increase as the state's failure to protect the civilian population causes political fracturing and distrust. The vulnerable population will retreat to core, sub-national identities, organizing communal defense forces.

As the clientelist group becomes strong or even dominant, local stability may actually increase. Areas that are deeper in their territory, and thus farther removed from the front line, are subject to less predation and a more organized, if still harsh, extractive program. As discipline has been established in these areas, violence is less random. Instead, to maximize long-term

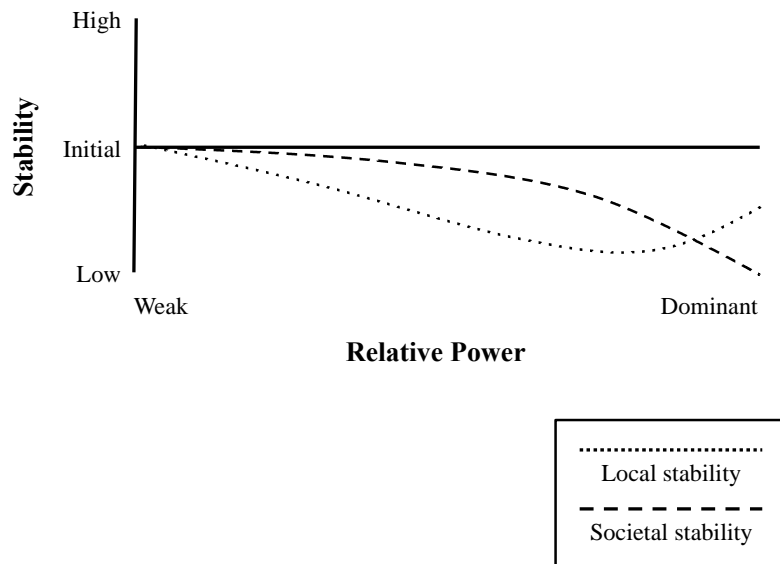
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<sup>21</sup> This scenario assumes that the clientelist VNSA is not receiving outside funding.



revenue, extraction is more systematic and sustainable—more akin to taxation than looting.<sup>22</sup> Toll-collecting roadblocks are created and raw resource extraction sites are worked to their maximum capacity. However, societal stability should decrease as the state’s security failures become increasingly intolerable for affected communities. Political fracturing intensifies and tension rises over the control and allocation of resources. Fortunately, this decrease in societal stability may be somewhat negated if national armed groups band together to balance the growing strength of the clientelist VNSAs.

**Figure 1:** Clientalist Actor’s Effects on Stability



*The Behavior of Communal VNSAs*

A weak communal actor will also have a relatively limited overall effect on stability. The organization of communal defense forces may succeed in pushing back bandits and other weak

<sup>22</sup> Chojnacki and Branovic, “The Violent Making and Unmaking of Governance”; Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (August 2006).

predatory groups, increasing local stability. However, the VNSA is too weak to project force beyond its core territory and must rely primarily on defensive tactics. Thus, its activities do not pose a threat to other ethnic and sectarian groups and will have little effect on societal stability.

As the communal VNSA gains in strength, it will use its increased combat capability to expand its operations, resisting threats to the collective and increasing local stability. However, it will be tempted to use its strength to seize resources from other, not necessarily hostile, groups. Controlling these resources would aid its constituency and, because communal VNSAs are only dependent on internal support, would further increase its own power. Thus, an intra-state security dilemma emerges such that, in the absence of a strong central government, each community seeks to monopolize resources and other sources of power, even at the expense of its peers.<sup>23</sup> This zero-sum security environment means that the empowerment of one community is threatening to all others, as no single community can be entirely sure of the others' intentions. Consequently, as the communal actor begins to grow stronger than rival groups, the balance of power is disrupted and societal stability dramatically decreases. This escalation of intercommunal tensions is very likely to escalate into open conflict. Preemptive attacks against rival groups lead to tit-for-tat retaliation and an escalating cycle of violence, significantly decreasing local stability particularly in ethnically or religiously mixed areas.

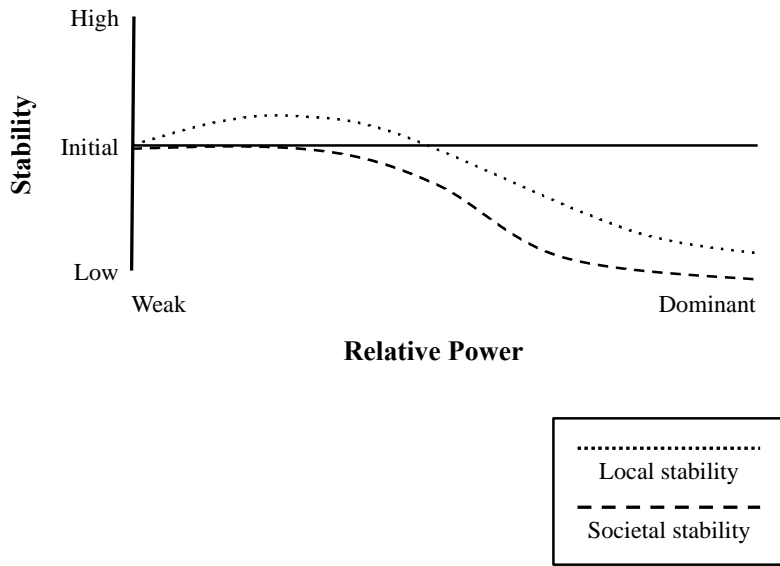
As the communal VNSA becomes stronger, societal and local stability continue to decline. Communal identities are essentially unalterable, so losing parties in an inter-communal engagement do not have the ability to surrender or defect to the winning side; having a different ethnic, religious, or geographic identity disqualifies them from membership. Thus, their only option is to fight on even more tenaciously, escalating violence. Attacks against rival civilian populations become increasingly brutal and, in their most extreme form, potentially devolve into

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<sup>23</sup> Chojnacki and Branovic, "The Violent Making and Unmaking of Governance."

genocide. Assuming all factions have the capacity to keep fighting, this brutality will only abate if one party becomes dominant, an unlikely scenario.

**Figure 2:** Communal Actor’s Effects on Stability



*The Behavior of Corporate VNSAs*

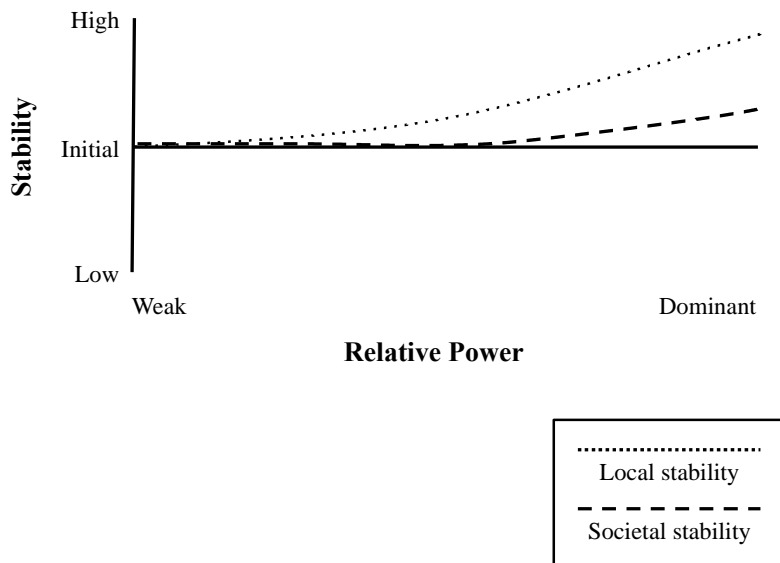
A weak corporate actor should slightly increase local stability. Organizing forces to protect its operations, it will secure areas vital to its trade, such as roads, markets, and port facilities. Because the VNSA is not directly responsible to a specific communal constituency, it may not protect the civilian population as effectively as would a communal VNSA. No major ethnic or sectarian groups are threatened by the corporate actor’s defensive measures, so societal stability remains unaffected.

As the corporate actor grows in strength, it will expand its area of operations to subdue the gangs, paramilitaries, and other predatory organizations that threaten its trade. Although this

action is taken out of self-interest, it provides a positive security externality.<sup>24</sup> Areas that were once vulnerable to bandits and criminals are now secured, increasing local stability. Corporate foot soldiers mostly abstain from looting local property as civilian support remains a necessary source of funding and supplies. Societal stability again remains mostly unaffected.

As the VNSA becomes very strong or dominant, local stability remains high. Although it is very powerful, the corporate actor does not inherently pose a threat to the nation’s ethnic and religious communities. Instead, societal stability should increase, as many of the country’s destabilizing predatory groups have been significantly curtailed. Thus, a very strong corporate actor creates significantly higher levels of local stability and, to a lesser degree, societal stability. As such, a dominant corporate actor represents the best-case scenario for the provision of security.

**Figure 3: Corporate Actor’s Effects on Stability**



<sup>24</sup> Ken Menkhaus labels this positive externality a ‘security shadow’ in his article, “Local Security Systems in Somali East Africa”.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper examines the case of the Civil Defense Forces during the 1991-2002 Sierra Leone Civil War. This longitudinal case study allows us to analyze how changes in relative strength affect stability. As the CDF, a corporate VNSA, increased in relative strength over the course of the civil war, we expect to see local stability rise significantly, with a somewhat smaller increase in societal stability.

A case study of the CDF is ideal for two reasons. First, as very little research has been done on stabilizing VNSAs, this analysis will illustrate the utility of my model and specifically the explanatory ability of the two independent variables, organization type and relative strength. Second, while I could examine any of the three actor types, the Civil Defense Forces, as a corporate group, constitute the best-case scenario and thus provide the most significant policy insights. Unlike many better-known VNSAs, the CDF was particularly adept at providing stability. In this regard, the case of the CDF is especially suitable, having puzzled observers as an apparent anomaly.

In order to categorize VNSAs, it is necessary to construct a measure of organization type. Clientelist actors often—but do not always—have heterogeneous membership, recruiting their soldiers from multiple demographic communities. Additionally, because clientelist foot soldiers serve the organization in return for material compensation, the soldiers must receive some sort of material income. This income does not necessarily have to be in the form of regular cash payments—it may also constitute drugs, women, or an authorization to pillage.<sup>25</sup> If for some reason members stop receiving material compensation, their allegiance to the VNSA should end.

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<sup>25</sup> Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “What the Fighters Say: A Survey of Ex-Combatants in Sierra Leone, June-August 2003,” *Columbia University*, 2004, <http://www.columbia.edu/~mh2245/SL.htm> (16 April 2015): 26-28.

In contrast, communal actors are most easily identified through their own rhetoric. Communal groups claim to represent a single ascriptive community and explicitly act on behalf of that collective. Their membership should be almost entirely homogenous along ethnic or religious lines.

Finally, corporate groups should have an ethnically or religiously heterogeneous membership, though that is less likely among smaller and more localized VNSAs. However, almost all participants in a corporate organization should be members of a single guild, society, or industry, or be connected to that institution through family or friends.

The other variable, relative strength, runs on a spectrum from weak to dominant and measures the relative number of armed combatants a VNSA can field. The weakest actors muster fewer soldiers than the majority of their domestic rivals, including the government. Conversely, stronger VNSAs field more soldiers than most of their rivals. A dominant actor has more fighters than all of its rivals combined.

Finally, the dependent variable is the level of stability, both local and societal. Local stability can be measured through the level of violence, particularly fatalities but also instances of mutilation or sexual violence. Local stability also comprises economic insecurity, whether in the form of looting, non-government sanctioned taxation, or forced labor.<sup>26</sup>

Societal instability can be somewhat more difficult to measure. It is most visible in acts of violence carried out along ethnic, sectarian, or other ascriptive lines. It can also be measured through the presence of media broadcasts denouncing specific ethnic or religious communities or inciting violence. Societal instability is perhaps most dramatically illustrated by violent regime

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<sup>26</sup> Note that local stability only includes those areas where the VNSA is itself present. This case study uses two different proxy measurements to estimate local stability. First, I examine just the CDF's own abuses across time, as any abuses the CDF committed must have occurred within territory that it controlled or contested. Second, I track the number of abuses that occurred in Bo district, one of the hotspots of CDF activity.

changes and coups.<sup>27</sup> For this case study, I use all available data to estimate the changing value of stability, including surveys, media reports, and expert analyses.

#### THE CDF AND THE SIERRA LEONE CIVIL WAR

The Sierra Leone Civil War began in 1991 when the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), an insurgent group primarily comprised of disaffected youth and backed by Charles Taylor's Liberian forces, launched an attack against the Sierra Leonean town of Bomaru. The Sierra Leone Army (SLA) was unable or unwilling to resist this incursion. Within months, the insurgency had spread throughout much of the country, leading to wide-scale humanitarian suffering. In the chaos of the conflict, a grassroots corporate VNSA was formed to protect the civilian population.<sup>28</sup> The Civil Defense Forces (CDF), as this group came to be known, played an instrumental role in the war, helping to defeat the RUF and create a lasting peace.

My theory predicts that the CDF, as a corporate actor, should have positively affected both local and societal stability as the organization grew in relative strength. Their actions, as discussed below, are mostly consistent with this hypothesis. However, during the 1996-1998 period, when the CDF first grew stronger than its rivals, there was an unexpected drop in both societal and local stability. The increase in violence was due to an intra-state *institutional* security dilemma, which adds an important new dimension to a theory of intra-state power dynamics and should be incorporated in future studies.

The following case study has five sections. First, I demonstrate that the Civil Defense Forces constituted a corporate VNSA. Second, I show that the CDF's relative strength increased

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<sup>27</sup> Incidents of protests and rioting, although not examined in this case study, are also indicators of societal instability.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick K. Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia: Civil War, Internal Displacement and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Africa Development* 12, no. 3/4 (1997): 77-79.

over three distinct phases: the start of conflict in 1991 to the SLPP's 1996 election victory, the 1996 election to the RUF's 1999 capture of Freetown, and the seizure of Freetown until the war's conclusion in 2002. Third, I present my findings for each phase, examining whether the CDF's effects on stability were consistent with the model's predictions. Fourth, I summarize the findings and discuss deviations from the model's expectations. Finally, I conclude the case study by considering potential alternative explanations.

### **The CDF as a Corporate VNSA**

Corporate VNSAs are those formed around a non-ascriptive identity, such as membership in a society or guild. To show that the Civil Defense Forces constituted a corporate VNSA, we need to demonstrate that its membership was primarily organized around this type of shared association. Similarly, the CDF should not exhibit the features of either a clientelist or a communal actor, namely a reliance on material compensation or an inherently exclusive, ascriptive identity.

The Civil Defense Forces were organized around traditional hunting societies, a shared yet non-ascriptive identity. Hunting societies played an important and long-standing role in pre-civil war Sierra Leonean culture.<sup>29</sup> Unlike the profit-driven guilds of European history, the purpose of these associations was primarily one of civil defense, protecting local communities from wild animals and criminals.<sup>30</sup> While individual members were connected with specific, ethnic communities, the greater hunter society was not confined to any single ethnic group. Indeed, the Civil Defense Forces included large numbers of volunteers from the Kuranko,

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<sup>29</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 85-86.

<sup>30</sup> Danny Hoffman, "The Meaning of a Militia: Understanding the Civil Defence Forces of Sierra Leone," *African Affairs* 106, no. 425 (2007): 643, 647.



Temne, Kono, and Mende ethnicities.<sup>31</sup> Although sub-factions within the CDF were mostly ethnically homogenous, the organization as a whole was heterogeneous.<sup>32</sup> Unlike a communal actor, the CDF never fought specifically on the behalf of a particular ascriptive identity, and it is telling that its major rival, the RUF, had a similar ethnic composition. The CDF was also not a clientelist group, as its recruits did not receive significant material compensation. Drug use and sexual license—both forms of material compensation—were expressly forbidden, as was the looting of valuables. Indeed, a post-war survey suggests that the majority of CDF soldiers did not expect to materially profit from their service.<sup>33</sup> The survey asked participants whether their faction had given them food, money, drugs, diamonds, or women. With the exception of diamonds, which were not frequently offered as an incentive, and food, CDF soldiers received much fewer spoils than their counterparts in other factions.

### **CDF Relative Strength**

The Civil Defense Forces grew in strength over three distinct phases. The first phase lasted from the beginning of the conflict in March of 1991 until the Sierra Leone People's Party's (SLPP) election victory in spring of 1996. It was during this period that the Civil Defense Forces were first mobilized, and they remained relatively weak. Although the precise numbers are difficult to estimate, their initial number of recruits was limited, primarily serving as auxiliaries for SLA units.<sup>34</sup> It was not until 1993 that the CDF sub-factions began to organize into a distinct fighting

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Humphreys and Weinstein, "Handling and Mishandling Civilians," 441.

<sup>33</sup> Humphreys and Weinstein, "What the Fighters Say"; Hoffman, "The Meaning of a Militia," 657-8. This does not hold true for a number of the CDF's partners, most notably the South African mercenary corporation Executive Outcomes as well as allied Liberian contingents. Both of these groups constituted clientelist actors. Note, however, that my theory focuses purely on domestic groups. It may be that VNSAs behave differently and have different effects on stability outside of their home country.

<sup>34</sup> Nathalie Włodarczyk, "Politically Enfranchising the Non-political: Safeguarding Peace through Civic Education and Inclusion? The Civil Defense Forces in Sierra Leone," *Civil Wars* 11, no. 2 (June 2009): 203.

force. Although they won some significant victories against the RUF, total CDF enlistment, even by 2006, was estimated at only 2,500 members.<sup>35</sup> In comparison, the SLA and RUF both fielded forces of around 10,000.<sup>36</sup>

The second phase of the war saw the CDF grow significantly, surpassing its rivals in relative strength. Following the SLPP's 1996 election victory, government support for the Civil Defense Forces increased dramatically, including both material and political aid.<sup>37</sup> As evidence of the CDF's rising status, Kamajor chief Samuel Hinga Norman was appointed as Deputy Defense Minister.<sup>38</sup> The organization's reputation as a fierce and successful fighting force encouraged many new recruits.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, combat reversals led to a high level of RUF desertions, while a number of SLA units were demobilized or confined to barracks.<sup>40</sup> The 1997 AFRC coup spurred additional CDF recruitment as many citizens enlisted to protect the democratically elected government.<sup>41</sup> New recruits included fighters from neighboring Liberia and Guinea as well as members of the Sierra Leonean diaspora.<sup>42</sup> By summer 1997, there were up to 37,000 Kamajors, making up the largest sub-faction of the CDF.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, the RUF fielded no more than 20,000 soldiers.<sup>44</sup>

In the third and final phase of the conflict, the CDF grew into Sierra Leone's dominant military force. Recruitment continued to expand the organization's ranks, while battlefield losses

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<sup>35</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 90.

<sup>36</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 3A (2004): 146, 174.

<sup>37</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 98; Wlodarczyk, "Politically Enfranchising the Non-political," 204. However, the CDF was not officially recognized as a legal entity until after the SLPP government was reinstated in 1998.

<sup>38</sup> Mariane C. Ferme and Danny Hoffman, "Hunter Militias and the International Human Rights Discourse in Sierra Leone and Beyond," *Africa Today* 50, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 76.

<sup>39</sup> Wlodarczyk, "Politically Enfranchising the Non-political," 204.

<sup>40</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 98.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Jones, "State failure and extra-legal justice: vigilante groups, civil militias and the rule of law in West Africa," *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, research paper no. 166 (October 2008): 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ferme and Hoffman, "Hunter Militias," 76.

<sup>43</sup> "Sierra Leone: Sierra Leone--Tension in Bo as Hunter Militiamen Gather," *Agence France Presse*, 29 May 2007. (World News Connection)

<sup>44</sup> "Sierra Leone: Sierra Leone--AFP Gives 'Estimates' of Fighting Forces," *Agence France Presse*, 7 January 1999. (World News Connection)

degraded the RUF and AFRC's combat strength. By the end of the war in 2002, the CDF was much larger than either of its rivals, with a self-reported strength of 99,000 soldiers. Although this figure is likely to be highly exaggerated, a more accurate picture of the CDF's relative strength can be determined through post-war disarmament statistics. Out of the 46,000 former combatants who took part in the disarmament process, 37,000 were CDF fighters, revealing the CDF's disproportionately large manpower.<sup>45</sup>

### **CDF Effects on Stability**

This section details the CDF's effects on local and societal stability across all three phases of the war. It also includes a short analysis of post-conflict stability.

#### *Phase 1: March 1991 – March 1996*

During the first phase of the war, the CDF remained a relatively weak corporate VNSA. My model predicts that local stability should have increased slightly while societal stability remained largely unaffected. The evidence mostly supports this prediction.

Societal stability remained mostly unchanged during the first phase of the war. On April 29, 1992, disaffected army officers, angered by the government's failure to effectively combat the RUF insurgency, launched a military coup. The officers successfully seized power and instated the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) as Sierra Leone's new government.<sup>46</sup> This politically volatile situation formed the backdrop for the CDF's emergence and is the benchmark against which subsequent societal instability is measured. In fact, political tensions seemed to have eased somewhat during this period. By 1996, the situation was calm enough to

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<sup>45</sup> Ferme and Hoffman, "Hunter Militias," 76.

<sup>46</sup> Joe Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone: Liberators or Nihilists?," in "Civil Militia," 54.

allow for the peaceful election of the SLPP. However, major sources of societal tension persisted. While the CDF's rise did not incite ethnic or religious conflict, it did provoke resistance from the military establishment.<sup>47</sup> The SLA resented the growing power of the CDF as a rival for the government's favor. Furthermore, many SLA soldiers were ill disciplined, attacking and looting the populations they were supposed to defend. These fighters, labeled as "sobels" or soldier-rebels, were seen by many civilians as a greater threat than even the RUF.<sup>48</sup> This predatory behavior brought SLA units into conflict with CDF forces defending the local communities, often resulting in violence. Many members of the SLA, including elements of its leadership, materially and politically benefitted from the conflict and the CDF threatened those profits. This rising tension constituted an intra-state, institutional security dilemma between the two competing national defense organizations, the army versus the CDF. The empowerment of one group inherently threatened the interests of the other.

In terms of local stability, the number of CDF abuses increased during this period. While this appears to be a contradictory finding, this may be due to the organization's growing size and area of operations; it is unclear whether the number of violations per area actually increased. Overall, the CDF's absolute level of abuse remained relatively low at 525 recorded incidents. In contrast, the RUF was recorded as committing 13,657 human rights violations during the same period.<sup>49</sup> Bo district, a center of CDF operations, saw a slight decrease in the number of violations, from 473 in 1991 to average of 415.6 per year between 1992 and 1996.<sup>50</sup> Given this

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<sup>47</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 51, 63.

<sup>48</sup> A. B. Zack-Williams, "Kamajors, 'Sobel' & the Militariat: Civil Society & the Return of the Military in Sierra Leonean Politics," *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 73 (1997): 375.

<sup>49</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 2 (2004): 39.

<sup>50</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Appendices (2004): 12. However, the number of violations in both 1994 and 1995 were higher than in 1991.

measure's constrained geographic dimension, it may be a more accurate estimate of local stability during this period.

*Phase 2: March 1996 – January 1999*

During the second phase of the war, the CDF grew into a strong corporate VNSA. According to the model, local stability should continue to increase, while societal stability should remain unaffected. However, the evidence from this period diverges significantly from these predictions, particularly for societal stability.

Societal stability decreased dramatically during the second phase of the conflict. Disloyal elements of the SLA were increasingly endangered by the CDF's growing strength. The appointment of Kamajor leader Samuel Hinga Norman was of particular concern as it threatened to divert resources away from the SLA to the CDF.<sup>51</sup> Open conflict broke out between SLA and CDF units, leading to a number of violent clashes.<sup>52</sup> CDF soldiers, in an attempt to reduce rebel attacks against the civilian population, preemptively raided nearby SLA bases, disarming the military fighters and appropriating their equipment. These tensions culminated in the May 1997 coup in which a group of army officers overthrew the government.<sup>53</sup> In its place, they installed the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, a military junta aligned with the RUF.<sup>54</sup> This AFRC/RUF alliance dramatically escalated the conflict, launching a renewed offensive against the CDF and other loyalist forces.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 58.

<sup>52</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 95-6.

<sup>53</sup> "Sierra Leone: Army, Kamajors Rivalry Said Key Cause of Sierra Leone Coup," *Agence France Presse*, 25 May 1997. (World News Connection)

<sup>54</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 59.

<sup>55</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 60. Loyal forces included an ECOMOG contingent, a multilateral armed force created by ECOWAS, a regional group of West African nations. There were about 5,000, mostly Nigerian, ECOMOG troops operating in Sierra Leone at the height of the conflict.

The effect on local stability during this period is mixed. On one hand, the number of CDF abuses per year rose significantly after the AFRC coup, from 87.67 in phase 1, to 401.75 in phase 2.<sup>56</sup> The CDF targeted and often killed those civilians they deemed to be AFRC collaborators.<sup>57</sup> However, within Bo district, violations against civilians decreased to an average of 171.25, less than half the level of the previous period.<sup>58</sup> It is likely that the CDF consolidated its hold on the area, preventing RUF attacks, while also reducing pressure to target civilian collaborators.<sup>59</sup> This increase in stability was likely offset by a dramatic increase in violence within more contested regions—areas threatened by the AFRC/RUF offensive.

### *Phase 3: January 1999 – January 2002*

During the third phase of the war, beginning with the loyalist recapture of Freetown in January of 1999, the CDF emerged as the strongest military force within Sierra Leone. As a dominant corporate VNSA, the model predicts that societal and particularly local stability should have improved, and the evidence supports this prediction.

Societal stability increased during the third phase of the war. The loyalists' battlefield victories greatly reduced AFRC/RUF combat strength, pressuring the rebels into signing the Lomé Peace Accord in July 1999.<sup>60</sup> Although the resulting cease-fire failed to end the conflict, opposition to the AFRC/RUF forces solidified. By 2000, UN, British, ECOMOG, and Guinean contingents assisted the CDF and the movement garnered significant popular support.<sup>61</sup> This coalition force finally emerged victorious, forcing the RUF to disarm and officially ending the

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<sup>56</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 2, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 62.

<sup>58</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Appendices, 12.

<sup>59</sup> Muana, "The Kamajoi Militia," 96.

<sup>60</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 61.

<sup>61</sup> See volume 2 in the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report for descriptions of all of the armed factions that participated in the war.

conflict in 2002.<sup>62</sup> As with the previous phases of the war, there is little evidence to suggest widespread ethnic or religious persecution.<sup>63</sup>

Local stability also increased during this period. The number of violations committed by the CDF dropped to an annual average of 215, nearly half its phase 2 level, although still higher than in phase 1.<sup>64</sup> Given the much expanded size of the CDF as well as its large area of operations, this data suggests that the organization was, on average, committing comparably few abuses by the end of the war. In Bo district, the number of recorded violations decreased to an average of 63.5 per year, by far the lowest level in the conflict.<sup>65</sup>

### *Post-Conflict Period*

Although they were the most powerful faction in Sierra Leone by the end of the war, the CDF demobilized instead of seeking political concessions.<sup>66</sup> The CDF's return to civilian life allowed for the peaceful reinstatement of the SLPP government and the creation of a new military institution, the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces, in which the CDF played no part.<sup>67</sup> Sierra Leone has remained stable since the cessation of hostilities. It has successfully managed three peaceful, democratic elections, including the 2007 transfer of power from the SLPP to its rival, the All People's Congress party.<sup>68</sup> These elections were deemed as generally free and

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<sup>62</sup> Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 63.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>64</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 2, 39.

<sup>65</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Appendices, 12.

<sup>66</sup> Humphreys and Weinstein, "What the Fighters Say," 4. Nearly 75 percent of CDF soldiers returned to their home communities at the conclusion of the war. In contrast, only 34 percent of RUF fighters did so.

<sup>67</sup> Humphreys and Weinstein, "What the Fighters Say," 39; Alie, "The Kamajor Militia in Sierra Leone," 64. In fact, the total exclusion of the CDF from the new security structure is largely due to politics. The rivalry between the military and the CDF persisted after the conclusion of the war.

<sup>68</sup> "Sierra Leone: IRIN Reports Less Violence Than Predicted as Voting day Nears," *UN Integrated Regional Information Network*, 9 August 2007. (World News Connection)

fair.<sup>69</sup> The country has continued to avoid ethnic or religious conflict and has no active insurgencies. Although some CDF soldiers later fought in Liberia, the vast majority have disarmed.<sup>70</sup> Altogether, there is a very high degree of local and societal stability in Sierra Leone.

### **Assessing the effect of the CDF on Stability in Sierra Leone**

As a corporate actor growing in relative strength, the CDF generally produced the predicted effects on stability. Both local and societal stability increased during phases 1 and 3 of the conflict. However, evidence from phase 2 runs contrary to my prediction. While the CDF's precise impact on local stability during this period remains unclear, societal stability significantly decreased as tensions between the CDF and SLA broke out into open conflict. This type of institutional intra-state security dilemma was not anticipated in my model of VNSA behavior.

However, this divergent finding is not inconsistent with the logic of my theory. It is unlikely that either a clientelist or a communal actor would have avoided provoking the SLA's backlash. Rather, it is probable that the SLA would have opposed any VNSA threatening its power, regardless of the type of actor. Considering that significant elements within the army were profiting from the war, any group that posed a reasonable chance of ending the conflict would have been viewed as a threat. Indeed, it is probable that clientelist and particularly communal VNSAs would have created even more societal unrest by not only provoking the SLA but also inciting ethnic or other inter-communal violence.

Over the course of the entire war, the CDF acted in the expected manner, increasing both local and societal stability as the VNSA grew in strength. The CDF's positive effects on stability are exemplified by two pieces of evidence. First, the CDF committed only 6 percent of the

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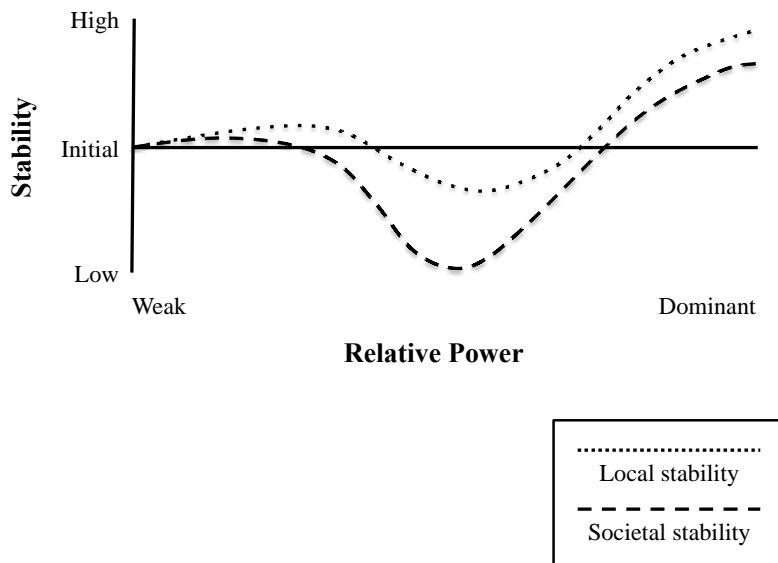
<sup>69</sup> "Sierra Leone: Earnest Bai Koroma wins presidential poll," *BBC News*, 23 November 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-20472962> (14 April 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Wlodarczyk, "Politically Enfranchising the Non-political," 209.



human rights abuses recorded by Sierra Leone’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In contrast, the RUF and the SLA/AFRC committed 60.5 and 16.6 percent respectively.<sup>71</sup> This data suggests that local stability was relatively much higher in CDF controlled areas. Second, despite the CDF’s dominant military presence by the end of the war, it fully disarmed and the country was able to successfully transition into a peaceful democracy. This process would have been impossible without a high level of societal stability.

**Figure 4:** The CDF’s Effects on Stability



Although the CDF generally increased stability as expected, it is possible that other factors also contributed to increased stability. Two arguments are particularly plausible.

The first argues that it was the presence of foreign troops, such as United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) peacekeepers, which was the key factor in improving Sierra Leone’s stability. Additionally, foreign soldiers may have acted as a moderating force on

<sup>71</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 2, 38.

the CDF, preventing it from committing abuses. Foreign forces certainly played an important role in the fight against the RUF and in protecting the civilian population. Overall, foreign troops committed very few human rights violations and local stability was almost certainly improved in the areas where they operated. Among the first foreign units to support the Sierra Leonean government was Executive Outcomes (EO), a South African private military contractor. EO seems to have performed effectively in Sierra Leone, inflicting major defeats on the RUF without a single allegation of human rights abuse.<sup>72</sup> Interestingly, EO also attempted to prevent violence between the CDF and the SLA, physically separating members of the two parties on several occasions.<sup>73</sup>

However, the presence of foreign soldiers does not wholly account for the Sierra Leone's improved stability. EO was only active in Sierra Leone from 1995 to 1996 before its contract was revoked in accordance with the terms of the Abidjan Peace Accord.<sup>74</sup> Although other foreign units later participated in the conflict, their numbers were fairly limited.<sup>75</sup> For example, the British mission in Sierra Leone was formed around a core of just 800 paratroopers.<sup>76</sup> As such, significant areas of the country were not affected by the foreign intervention. Many CDF units had little or no contact with these foreign soldiers. Consequently, it seems unlikely that the entire CDF's behavior could have been affected. Furthermore, the CDF operated in a relatively benign manner even in those periods where foreign troops were not present. This fact would suggest that the CDF's stabilizing behavior was largely independent of foreign influence.

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<sup>72</sup> *Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Volume 2, 89.

<sup>73</sup> William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*, 125.

<sup>74</sup> Lansana Gberie, *A Dirty War in West Africa: The RUF and the Destruction of Sierra Leone* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 93-95.

<sup>75</sup> "Intervention that worked," *The Economist*, 15 May 2002, <http://www.economist.com/node/1131038> (14 April 2015). The largest foreign force was UNAMSIL which had over 17,000 personnel in Sierra Leone by the end of the war. However, these soldiers were ineffectively deployed and had relatively few successes against the RUF.

<sup>76</sup> Alan Little, "The brigadier who saved Sierra Leone," *BBC News*, 15 May 2010, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/8682505.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/8682505.stm) (14 April 2015).

The second theory postulates that the CDF had a positive effect on stability because of its unique identity as a guild of traditional village defenders. The CDF's example thus exaggerates the stabilizing effects of corporate VNSAs. Other, more typical corporate groups would have behaved differently, would not have been nearly as incentivized to aid civilians, and would not have affected stability so positively. As a result, the CDF constitutes an anomaly and is therefore not a generalizable case.

This concern is valid; the CDF certainly represents an exceptional scenario. Most corporate VNSAs are unlikely to be as successful at creating stability. However, the experience of Sierra's Leone Civil Defense Forces still provides a useful case in that it reveals the potential for corporate actors to improve stability. The example of the CDF shows what the ideal VNSA is capable of achieving in a less than ideal environment. Although other corporate groups may not be as successful, they can still affect stability in a positive manner. Recognizing and acting on this potential utility may be crucial in future conflicts.

#### VNSAs AND U.S. POLICY

The case of Sierra Leone's Civil Defense Forces suggests that VNSAs do not automatically undermine stability. As a result, weak governments may be able to cooperate with VNSAs to help provide security in otherwise "ungoverned" territory. Similarly, as the United States pursues counterterrorist, counterinsurgent, and post-conflict reconstruction programs in foreign countries, it may be able to work alongside some local VNSAs. In fact, many VNSAs may be less illiberal, corrupt, and abusive than their local government counterparts, as was the case in Sierra Leone. This reality runs counter to the common perception of VNSAs as inherently destabilizing.

As the United States and its Western allies are increasingly constrained by economic factors, a deliberate policy of partnering with VNSAs to accomplish foreign policy objectives has become more attractive. With a reduced ability to intervene directly in foreign territory, especially in the form of large-scale military interventions, a strategy of cooperating with VNSAs may be necessary to protect U.S. interests throughout the world. For example, the Kurdish Peshmerga, Shia militia, and Sunni tribesmen—all VNSAs—have played a crucial role in the U.S. campaign against ISIS. Partnering with VNSAs offers a major advantage in that it greatly reduces the amount of resources and personnel the United States must invest in the target area. As a result, the United States can have a much smaller footprint on the ground. Similarly, the relatively low cost of supporting VNSAs allows operations to be accomplished more cheaply than through direct forms of intervention.

*When should states partner with VNSAs?*

VNSAs have the potential to undertake a wide scope of missions, ranging from basic law enforcement to proxy warfare.<sup>77</sup> Individual groups will be better suited to accomplishing specific tasks depending on their unique institutional characteristics and the environment in which they operate. For governments seeking to foster stability, they should avoid partnering with VNSAs that either directly profit from force of arms (clientelist actors) or those that are organized around

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<sup>77</sup> The potential of VNSAs to fulfill a variety of objectives is exemplified by the case of Iran. Iran is currently partnered with VNSAs in at least four different areas. In western Afghanistan, Iran supports local militias, both Sunni and Shia, against the Taliban. This action stabilizes Iran's eastern border, providing a buffer zone from insurgency and instability. In Iraq, Iranian-backed Shia militias serve as one of the country's most competent fighting forces, increasing Iran's influence in Iraq, defending Shia holy sites and pilgrims (many of whom are Iranians), and protecting Iran's western border. In Lebanon, Iran supports Hezbollah, a proxy through which it can engage Israel. Finally, in Yemen, Iranian backing for Shia Houthi rebels has destabilized Saudi Arabia's southern border, weakening the Sunni kingdom's strategic position.

ascriptive identities (communal actors).<sup>78</sup> Working with corporate groups avoids the pitfalls of cooperating with either clientelist or communal VNSAs. Corporate actors have little or no incentive to prolong warfare as it limits the profits of their trade. They also do not pose an inherent threat to any national community, although, as we have seen, they can still pose a threat to state institutions. While at first glance corporate groups may seem to be odd candidates for security providers, they are uniquely qualified to perform that role. Their potential for providing security as a positive externality—what Ken Menkhaus terms a “security shadow”—is particularly promising and should be investigated further.<sup>79</sup> In general, the United States will most likely seek to employ VNSAs for counternarcotics and counterinsurgency campaigns, operations for which corporate VNSAs’ positive effects on stability are an advantage.

Just as corporate VNSAs can be used to stabilize a territory, clientelist and especially communal groups may be deliberately employed to cause instability. A number of states have recognized the destabilizing potential of these types of VNSAs. For example, the Sudanese government has recruited a number of predominantly Arab pastoralist groups to serve as militias. These communal VNSAs, called the Janjaweed or “devil horsemen” by their enemies, have been deployed in Sudan’s western Darfur region, antagonizing the local sedentary communities. Darfur serves as a base of power for opposition movements, so destabilizing the territory actually serves the government’s interests, weakening and dividing its rivals. By supporting the Janjaweed, the government has undermined the resources of its opponents at a very low cost to itself, essentially using the VNSA as a weapon of denial.<sup>80</sup> Similarly, it is probable that some

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<sup>78</sup> Communal groups are not nearly as destabilizing if the area’s population is totally homogenous. However, this scenario is very rare.

<sup>79</sup> Menkhaus, “Local Security Systems in Somali East Africa.”

<sup>80</sup> Usman A. Tar, “Counter-Insurgents or Ethnic Vanguard? Civil Militia and State Violence in Darfur Region, Western Sudan,” in *Civil Militia*; Theresa Whelan, interview with the author, 20 November 2014.

governments will use VNSAs as destabilizing agents in foreign territory, a possibility that the United States and allied governments should consider before supporting any non-state actor.

Naturally, there are some VNSAs with which it will be unacceptable for the United States to cooperate directly. This category would include, for example, VNSAs that produce narcotics or those that are ideologically opposed to the United States. Furthermore, there are risks to collaborating with any VNSA, even corporate actors. Groups that produce considerable revenue, such as some particularly industrious corporate actors, may increase the potential for corruption. Similarly, some VNSAs can be vulnerable to cooption by political parties, as is the case with the Bakassi Boys in Nigeria; the militia has increasingly become an instrument of political intimidation.<sup>81</sup> In all cases, it is vital to remember that VNSAs are rarely static entities; their structure, objectives, and behavior can change, sometimes very quickly. Consequently, the United States should closely observe partner VNSAs, continuously reevaluating their reliability and utility.

The model presented in this paper is designed to be a useful heuristic for policy makers. Ecological approaches of analyzing VNSAs, such as the method advocated by Troy Thomas, will provide a deeper understanding of any particular group's behavior and tendencies.<sup>82</sup> However, this form of analysis requires considerable intelligence on and local knowledge of the VNSA, its environment, and other actors. This information may not be always available, especially within a limited timeframe. As such, classifying VNSAs by organization type offers a straightforward and quick means to attain an initial understanding of an actor, its behavior, and its potential effects on stability.

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<sup>81</sup> Omeje, "The Egbesu and Bakassi Boys," in *Civil Militia*; Johannes Harnischfeger, "The Bakassi Boys: fighting crime in Nigeria," *Modern African Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003). See William Reno's *Warlord Politics and African States* for a greater discussion of this danger.

<sup>82</sup> Bartolomei, Casebeer, and Thomas, "Modeling Violent Non-State Actors."

*What if there are no corporate VNSAs available?*

In some scenarios, there may not be any viable corporate actor with which to cooperate, so the United States may have to work alongside other types of VNSAs. In fact, a number of current U.S. and allied counterinsurgent and counterterrorist programs rely on non-corporate VNSAs. Often, these are communal groups, as is the case in Iraq, Mali, and Afghanistan (the Afghan Local Defense Forces). More rarely, the United States cooperates with clientelist actors, such as Afghan warlords.<sup>83</sup> While it may be riskier than working with corporate VNSAs, communal and clientelist groups do not necessarily cause greater instability. When working with these types of VNSAs, action can be taken to mitigate their particular risks.

If the United States cooperates with a communal actor, political and diplomatic efforts should be made to alleviate fears among other ethnic, religious, or geographic communities, thereby reducing the possibility of societal instability. For example, when arming Afghan village defense forces, instead of cooperating with just one community, U.S. forces could support all of the local villages equally to avoid disrupting their balance of power. This action would empower the villagers relative to Taliban insurgents, yet would limit the risk of inter-communal warfare.

Cooperating with a clientelist actor can be more challenging as such groups derive wealth and power from the presence, or at least the threat, of conflict. States can partially mitigate the risk of instability by reducing contact between the clientelist actor and vulnerable sources of wealth, particularly the civilian population. For example, mercenaries should ideally be employed in conflict zones with a minimal civilian presence; such groups should not be used for law enforcement in civilian areas. States that seek to employ clientelist VNSAs should do so to

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<sup>83</sup> Joseph Goldstein, "Afghan Militia Leaders, Empowered by U.S. to Fight Taliban, Inspire Fear in Villages," *New York Times*, 17 March 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/asia/afghan-militia-leaders-empowered-by-us-to-fight-taliban-inspire-fear-in-villages.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/asia/afghan-militia-leaders-empowered-by-us-to-fight-taliban-inspire-fear-in-villages.html?_r=1) (14 April 2015); Ulrich Schneckener, "State Building or New Modes of Governance? The Effects of International Involvement in Areas of Limited Statehood," in Risse, *Governance without a State?*.

combat a specific adversary, preferably in a conventional warfare setting. Once that mission is accomplished, the clientelist actor should be removed, disbanded, or otherwise disarmed as quickly as possible.

However, in some conflict environments, minimizing exposure to clientelist VNSAs may be impossible. For example, the Afghan government continues to rely on warlords to provide local security in some regions. This role necessitates close and prolonged contact between the clientelist forces and the civilian population. In these scenarios, it may be possible to shape the behavior of the clientelist actor itself. The local incentive structure must be shifted such that the clientelist actor is motivated to act in a stability-inducing manner. While research suggests that this process may happen naturally in some scenarios, it can also be artificially prompted if, for example, support for the VNSA is explicitly contingent on the group's good behavior.<sup>84</sup>

#### *How should the United States engage with VNSAs?*

If the United States and its allies cooperate with VNSAs, they will need to establish an institutional framework within which to interact with these groups. VNSAs are in almost all cases extra-legal entities, and their collaboration with the state poses serious legal and often political challenges. This difficulty is especially acute with transnational VNSAs, adding further legal, political, and social complications. The United States must recognize these difficulties and find a means of addressing them in a systematic, comprehensive, and farsighted manner. For example, U.S. policy makers should devise standards of accountability in order to oversee the behavior of partner VNSAs in a consistent fashion.

An equally important consideration is how the United States interacts with host nations, states in which VNSAs operate. The United States' VNSA partners may not have good relations

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<sup>84</sup> Menkhaus, "Local Security Systems in Somali East Africa."



with the local government, causing significant political complications. Similarly, some governments, or elements within the regime, can actually be threatened by increased stability, even within their own territory; in the case of Sierra Leone, factions within the SLA were directly benefiting from the country's insecurity.<sup>85</sup> These groups may seek to undermine the U.S. campaign and its VNSA partners, a risk that should be considered before initiating any foreign operation.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the common perception of violent non-state actors as inherently destabilizing, many VNSAs have the potential to bolster security. This paper suggests that corporate actors, those VNSAs organized around a non-ascriptive identity, are the most likely to contribute positively to stability. In the case of Sierra Leone's civil war, the Civil Defense Forces, a corporate VNSA, played a crucial role in defeating the RUF insurgency and reinstating the democratic government. If the United States and its allies partner with suitable VNSAs, the CDF's success can be replicated in other conflict areas.

In order to realize this potential, further research should be undertaken to better understand VNSA dynamics, particularly the effects of external support. It is likely that the content, means, and origin of outside support all have substantial effects on a VNSA's relative strength and behavior. For example, in areas where the population is vehemently anti-American, overt U.S. material support for a VNSA may actually serve to decrease the actor's relative strength. Similarly, additional research should focus on how VNSAs operate in various environments. In particular, a group's behavior is likely to diverge from that described here when operating in foreign territory.

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<sup>85</sup> William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States*.

This paper has examined VNSA effects on stability. However, two other criteria are equally important for choosing ideal VNSA partners. First, the group should be effective at accomplishing its mission, whether combating U.S. enemies or providing basic law and order in a remote region. Second, VNSA partners should not pose a threat to allied governments, whether directly or by indirectly undermining a host nation's legitimacy. More research should be done to investigate these two additional criteria.

As the process of technological democratization continues to intensify, VNSAs are increasingly powerful actors on the world stage. Especially in light of decreasing U.S. economic dominance, the United States can no longer afford to ignore non-state groups or view them as inherently less significant than state actors. On the one hand, the United States must have the capability and foresight to defend itself from hostile VNSAs, particularly terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda. However, if the United States is to maintain its influence and protect its interests abroad, it must also be able to work alongside friendly VNSAs. For a foreign policy community that cut its teeth in the state-centric dynamics of the Cold War world, this new, collaborative approach will require a paradigm shift in U.S. strategic thinking. Given the rate at which VNSAs are adapting to a flatter, less state-controlled world, that change cannot come too soon.

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