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Assessing violent nonstate actorness in global politics: a framework for analysis

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Abstract *This article begins with the assumption that the most important shift that is taking place in contemporary global politics is the shift in polity power from the predominance of the state to the rising importance of nonstate actors. It goes on to argue that disciplinary understandings of this shift and, in particular, the nature of the actors driving it, remain dispersed. This article aims, therefore, to provide a framework for evaluating the global political potential—or actorness—of one type of nonstate actor, the violent nonstate actor, positing it as that most overtly challenging states’ authority, and therefore with the potential to play a uniquely stimulating role in the shifting of power. Based on three principles of autonomy, representation and influence, the framework provides broad criteria for understanding violent nonstate actors, as well as a means for evaluating violent nonstate actorness and for exploring its potential in global politics.*

How important are nonstate actors? Well, one nonstate actor, the Jihadists, with the help of another nonstate actor, Fox TV, were able to bring the great American superpower into a war against all kinds of other shadowy nonstate actors. I guess that answers the question.

—Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, May 2011, Ankara, Turkey

Introduction

Power in global politics is shifting in at least two distinct ways. The first is in a geographical sense, with power moving from certain traditionally strong states or regions, such as the West, or Europe, to other states and regions, for example, the East, or Eurasia. Equally interesting though is a parallel shift in the power of politics (Ferguson and Mansbach 1996; Ferguson et al 2000), in other words, from statehood to nonstatehood, or from the predominance of the state as the primary pillar to which international relations has been both practically and conceptually bound, to the rising importance and centrality of nonstate actors and transnational relations (see, for example, Held et al 1999; Mathews 1997).

Both shifts signal major transformations, but the latter is arguably more dramatic in terms of the effect it is having on the nature of global politics. Geographical shifts still constitute changes taking place *within* the state system, so although the names of the dominant actors may be altered, the basic understanding of practices and behaviours can be expected to remain more or less similar. A polity shift, however, is a substantially different kind of change,

with potential affects that we still know relatively little about. Not only are the numbers and types of actors proliferating beyond states, but, with these new actors' increasing involvement in transnational politics, most of the principal traditional concepts and patterns of relations can no longer be counted on as building blocks for scholarly enquiry or speculation. For example, a concept such as anarchy, upon which so much of modern international relations scholarship was built up, may be seeing a qualitative change to a form that is more raw and, indeed, 'anarchic' than in past understandings; nonstate actors may not react in predictable ways to traditional state behaviours, such as to acts of deterrence; and it remains unclear what happens to classic patterns of alliances or balancing when nonstates begin to take a role.

Even though such a shift has occurred before in the not-so-distant past,¹ our understandings of what it means, the context in which it is occurring, and the nature of the actors driving it, remain dispersed and in that sense, limited. The starting point to understanding the shift lies in further conceptualization of its primary actors—nonstates. For international relations, the 'state', and the (fairly) common understanding of what it was and what it meant, has long provided a pillar around which scholarly inquiry could be built up. Whether in a positive or negative sense, whether the state is your punching bag or your mainstay, it has provided some kind of clarity and a reference point against which or to which scholarship can refer. When it comes to nonstate actors, however, we have far less comprehensive research on what they are, how they interact and how they may be changing over time. If we accept that a polity shift is occurring, we must develop a deeper understanding of this form of agency. Only with such understandings can we begin fully to analyse the implications of this shift for our existing knowledge of global affairs, from the implications for basic concepts like anarchy or sovereignty, to those for basic patterns and practices, such as alliance building or power transitions.

This article aims, therefore, to provide a framework for discussing the potential role in global politics of one particular form of nonstate actor. Violent nonstate actors, many of which are the most overt challengers to state authority and dominant position in world affairs, may have a uniquely stimulating role to play in the shifting of polity power, and therefore are the focus of this framework. By providing broad criteria for understanding and evaluating violent nonstate actors, the article ultimately intends to provide a means for assessing violent nonstate actorhood and for exploring its potential in global politics.

Understanding violent nonstate actors in global politics

Research on the transnational realm and a polity shift towards nonstate actors (NSA), is often still very much statist inspired, in the sense that its ultimate aim has been to explore the possible declining role of the state (Avant et al 2010; Slaughter 2004). Given that goal, it is ironic that in these works there has generally been less attention paid to the *violent* NSAs which in many cases may pose the

¹ If we look back to pre-Westphalian days we see evidence of a similar polity shift in reverse, with the gradual decline of the feudal system (of largely autonomous actors) and the increasing consolidation of actors into what would become states (Osiander 2001).

most direct challenges to state authority. This tendency may be because the authors of these works are more likely to come from a liberal strand of international relations theorizing, and thus their attention is drawn to the more benign agents of a new global governance, such as transnational activists (Cunningham 2001; Landolt and Goldring 2010; Tarrow 2005; 2007), advocacy networks (Bloodgood 2010; Keck and Sikkink 1998) and NGOs (Armstrong et al 2010; Holzscheiter 2005; Arts et al 2001). Or perhaps because many others have approached the issue of declining state power from an economic perspective (for example, Kahler and Lake 2003; Hart and Prakash 2000) and the specific role of 'private authority' (Cutler et al 1999)—a concept that others (Hall and Biersteker 2002; Katsikas 2011) have, admittedly, attempted to expand beyond its more peaceful elements to include its 'illicit' forms. The challenge to state power is also frequently considered from a legal perspective (for example, Maragia 2002; Noortmann 2002; Noortmann and Ryngaert 2010; Young 2010), but still without a particular focus on violent NSAs.

If those works have tended to emphasize the broader questions of whether and, if so, how NSAs, violent or not, are exhibiting increasing significance in global politics, other works have chosen to focus specifically on the violence that is associated with a portion of these power challengers, basically questioning why, when and how these new actors in global politics choose to use violent methods (Chenoweth and Lawrence 2010; Kalyvas 2010; Weinstein 2007). There are discussions about the change in the very concept of warfare that can be associated with the introduction of new powerful actors (Kaldor 1999) as well as changes in the ways such actors affect how wars and international crises are dealt with (Mishali-Ram 2009). Still others have drawn on the extensive domestic political literature on insurgents and rebellion when looking more pointedly at violent examples of NSAs, or nonstate armed groups (Krause and Milliken 2009), and how they are interacting both with states (for example, Mulaj 2010; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al 2011) and within the larger environment (for example, Adamson 2005) to mobilize strength and project power. Yet a further body of work looking at violent NSAs can be found in certain subfields of international relations such as terrorism studies (for example, Sageman 2004) or policy-based works on transnational criminal groups (for example, Williams 2008; Williams and Savona 1996).

One thing that is evident from the varied literature on NSAs is that apparently obvious concepts are not always easy to define. Stepping back from nonstate actors, it has even proven controversial to attempt to define 'state', with a tendency to rely on 'sovereignty' or 'power' as ways of determining statehood (Paul et al 2003), and resulting in a large literature distinguishing between different types of states, from weak to strong (for example, Migdal 1988), or from quasi to failing and beyond (for example, Call 2011; Jackson 2000). Unsurprisingly, therefore, defining 'nonstate', and identifying what does or does not constitute an NSA, has proven equally challenging. Indeed, existing definitions seem to reflect the diversity of the definers' own research interests or background, from Huntington's (1993) defining of 'civilizations' as NSAs, Hall and Biersteker's (2002) understanding based on types of authority, Josselin and Wallace's (2001) definition based on transnationalness, or other scholars' policy-based perspectives (Thomas et al 2005; Schulz et al 2004). When it comes to violent NSAs (VNSAs) in particular, recent works have presented fairly similar typologies outlining five or

six types, generally divided along the lines of: (1) insurgents, (2) other domestic militant groups, (3) warlords/urban gangs, (4) private militias/military companies, (5) terrorists and (6) criminal organizations (Krause and Miliken 2009; Mulaj 2010; Williams 2008). These works all recognize to some degree the problems involved with defining something primarily on the basis of it *not* being something else—a state—particularly when states themselves are not homogenous, static entities and when the so-called ‘nonstates’ are often very much intertwined with states. In their efforts to nevertheless try and develop a better understanding of these actors and their increasing importance, they have created their typologies, taking into consideration such factors as whether or not the groups are seeking change or maintenance of the status quo; to what extent they are profit-driven, what type of organization, identity, goals and purposes they have, what kind and degree of violence they use and how they recruit their members.

Such works have been critical in understanding what VNSAs are, and for providing ways of distinguishing among them. Other works have drawn on such categorizations and case studies to offer frameworks that would allow for the evaluating of NSAs’ respective strengths and weaknesses. An early example of this is Hocking and Smith’s (1990) brief discussion, in which they took three traditional criteria for measuring state actorness—sovereignty, recognition, control of territory and people—and adjusted them to make them relevant for NSAs. Thus, instead of state-defined sovereignty, they wrote of entities having autonomy, or ‘freedom of action’ when trying to achieve their objectives. In place of formal recognition, they explored the range of the constituency represented, and rather than an actor’s control over territory and people, referred to the overall ‘influence’ an actor is able to exert. Arts et al’s (2001) comprehensive edited volume on NSAs concludes with a typology of NSA ‘mattering’ that distinguishes between influence at an institutional and a strategic level; the former referring to NSAs being a part of institutional arrangements in international relations, the latter to NSAs being able to intervene strategically to affect processes or outcomes in international politics and law making.

Other approaches to exploring the influence or importance of NSAs over the years have offered up concrete frameworks for measuring ‘nonstate actorness’, most of which have been prepared to consider the role of the EU as a ‘supranational’ nonstate entity. These various frameworks all share at least two primary characteristics for determining actorness: (1) some reference to having a decision-making and policy-making system or ability (2) and some reference to having the capacity for implementing the decisions or policies made. Beyond that, most refer to some starting point of shared interests (Sjösted 1977), a concept that developed into shared values and principles (Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Dryburgh 2008) and to the idea of a broader shared identity, including shared norms, interests and goals (Doidge 2007). Most of these frameworks also include some description of the need to be recognized by other actors in order to achieve ‘actorness’—sometimes in the legal sense (Bretherton and Vogler 2006; Vogler 1999), other times in the sense of requiring ‘credibility’ (Doidge 2007) or in the more Constructivist sense of needing to be perceived as an actor by others (Dryburgh 2008). Two of these frameworks include a specific criterion of ‘autonomy’, though because the focus in these works is often on the EU, the understanding is not in the sense of being separate from states, but rather as an

entity able to remain autonomous from the individual states of which it is comprised.

The previous literature has provided critically important and useful ideas for how to define, categorize and think about VNSAs and their relation with the state, but existing frameworks that can be applied to assess these actors' potential role in global politics are more limited. There remains a need to develop these frameworks further if they are to be useful for looking at the actorness of individual NSAs (rather than a 'nonstate' umbrella body) and in particular that of violent NSAs. A framework for defining, understanding, and evaluating VNSAs needs to assume, for example, a different position on the issue of legal recognition and credibility, or on the understanding of systems for policy making and implementation. This article attempts to provide such a framework. The Autonomy, Representation and Influence (ARI) framework presented below is aimed specifically at evaluating the global political potential of violent nonstate actors, defined here as all armed groups that are not fully and directly under the consistent control of any particular state. 'VNSA' includes therefore all of the groups described above in the various typologies, from insurgents and warlords to terrorists and transnational criminals.²

While the ARI framework does not constitute a set of exact measurements for 'qualifying' as a VNSA with global potential, it does provide common points for discussing, analysing and comparing the global actorness of different VNSAs. Evidence of true global actorness potential of a VNSA derives from a combination of all three primary factors on the ARI. Thus, for example, a VNSA may have minimal autonomy but high influence (for example, a private military company) or very high autonomy but low representation and influence (for example, a small terrorist group), and therefore be judged as having only moderate global actorness. However, a VNSA that is actively autonomous (see below), maintains a good balance of representation, and displays both the sustainability and impact capacity that constitutes influence, has the potential to affect politics and international relations at a global level.

Conceptualizing VNSAs: the ARI framework

Autonomy

The first criterion in the framework speaks to the essence of nonstate actorness—the distinction and distance of NSAs in general and VNSAs in particular, from states. Such an apparent dichotomy between states and nonstates must consider of course that neither side of the pair is a static entity. States are well known to vary between stronger and weaker examples, or even to fall at times into

²Although private military groups or companies may seem to remain outside of the definition, and, indeed, they are not a part of all typologies (Williams (2008, 9), for example, excludes them for being 'inherently limited' since they 'rarely challenge state authority and legitimacy'), their more obvious bonds with state governments do not necessarily rule out their being evaluated with this framework. However, the first component of the framework, autonomy, when applied to private military companies, will reveal that this reliance on states for primary funding makes such groups weaker in terms of their potential global actorness.

Table 1. Elements of VNSA autonomy

Distance from the state	Distance from the international state system
Free from state involvement Able to survive state persecution	Being sovereignty-free

categorizations of quasi or failing states. Similarly, nonstate actorness is not an either/or concept, but may be seen as moving along a spectrum from relatively more statist to relatively more nonstatist. Variation for actors along this spectrum can be attributed to two main factors: the amount of influence states hold over the actor (does, for example, the VNSA rely on states for any financial or other support?), and the degree of the actor's connection with statist principles (for example, does the VNSA adhere to all/some state norms and regulations or does it, at the opposite extreme, actively fight against a state or states?). These factors are discussed here under the headings of distance from the state, and distance from the state-centric regime (see Table 1).

Distance from the state. With respect to being free from state involvement, obviously, the fewer ties between a VNSA and individual states, the more autonomous that VNSA can be considered. Such autonomy in and of itself does not mean that a VNSA is inherently stronger or has greater potential actorness—a VNSA may be receiving and thriving on state support—however, the purpose of considering 'distance' from states when evaluating VNSAs' global potential is to look at the degree to which a VNSA is *beholden* to any state. VNSAs may be very much connected to a state or states. They may receive direct financial or infrastructural support from a state as in the case of a private military organization or a terrorist organization using one state's territory as a base for fighting against a neighbouring state, or they may simply be tied in the sense that they take advantage of a state's shortcomings or grey areas, as in the case of a criminal network making use of corruption or weakness in a state to bypass restrictions. But does that VNSA's existence and continuation *depend* on that support? To what extent can the VNSA thrive if the state's/states' direct or indirect support is withdrawn? Obviously in the case of a private military company being hired by a state, the bond is essential, and thus such a VNSA could be said to have very low autonomy. But in the case of less direct support, for example, an ethnic terrorist organization that receives financial or infrastructural support from the target state's neighbouring countries, is that VNSA able to find alternative means of finance or alternative locations from which to conduct their activities if the neighbouring states cut them off? Evidence of being able to do this would indicate a comparatively higher degree of autonomy.

A further distinction in 'degree' of autonomy can be made between 'being able to survive without state support', and 'being able to survive state persecution'. The latter could be considered a distinguishing aspect of VNSA autonomy, recognizing a distinction between what can be called 'active' and 'passive' autonomy. Thus, having passive autonomy from the state characterizes those VNSAs that are to varying degrees able to exist free from state involvement, whereas active autonomy includes the additional characteristic of the VNSA being

able to defend itself effectively against statist efforts to defeat it—a feature that will be discussed in more detail in the framework section on influence. Obviously, a VNSA's relationship with states may be accommodative or conflictive, but it is logical that more conflictive relationships are more likely to require a VNSA to be more autonomous—both passively and actively. The extent to which the VNSA is able to succeed at this, to exist if necessary without state support and to survive statist attempts to crush it, can be considered a sign of its degree of autonomy and of its potential for global actorness.

Distance from the state-centric regime. Moving beyond the more concrete understanding of distance from the state in terms of largely financial or infrastructural support, a VNSA's degree of autonomy can also be considered as distance from the overall international 'legitimate' system of broadly recognized state-based institutions and organizations, practices, instruments and norms, all of which taken together can be labelled as the state-centric regime. This regime represents the official and generally accepted legal skeleton of global governance. Parallel to this regime however, is an alternate one of instruments and practices considered by most in the state-realm to be illegitimate and illicit; a realm with its own political and financial dimensions and norms.

A VNSA's distance from the state-centric regime, and thus its degree of autonomy, can be considered from two, interrelated perspectives: how well the VNSA is able to create new and convenient alternative regime instruments and/or agencies (or take advantage and adapt to existing ones) in order to function, and how well the VNSA is able to manipulate weaknesses within the state-centric regime in order to ease its own functioning. Examples of alternative practices include such things as creating untraceable means for transferring money, using legal companies to finance illegal operations as in the case of Osama bin Laden's legal construction and oil companies that provided funding for the Jihadist terrorist network, or human trafficking networks' mastering of the forged documentation industry. Making use of weaknesses in the state-centric regime has been discussed at length in works on the use of failing states as platforms for this type of alternative activity (recent works include [Bourne 2011](#); [Silva 2013](#)).

In a sense then, whereas distance from the state refers to how much a VNSA is beholden to a state or states for support, distance from the state-centric regime looks at the degree to which the VNSA is beholden to overall statist principles and practices. To what extent does a VNSA act as a 'sovereignty-free' actor—[Rosenau's \(1990\)](#) description of actors in the multicentric world. Although they may be located within the jurisdiction of states, the sovereignty-free actors of the multicentric world are able to evade the constraints of states and pursue their own goals. The more efficiently they are able to do this, the more autonomous they can be considered to be.

Representation

The second criterion for this framework, representation, is based on a similar premise to one included in earlier nonstate actorness frameworks under various headings of 'shared community' or 'identity'. In those cases, when the NSA being analysed was the EU, the question of whether this actor constituted a united body

of shared interests, values and goals was important for assessing the EU's ability to work as an independent actor rather than a diverse conglomeration of individual states. In the case of VNSAs, having a common identity among members again serves the essential purpose of creating a relatively unified actor that can then identify its priorities and policies, but it has the added role of serving to the group's own regeneration potential, which is necessary for its survival, and thus for its 'actorness'. Unlike states, which generally find that their constituents naturally regenerate themselves if not even gradually increasing in number, an NSA, whether violent or not, must both work to maintain its members and to attract new ones. The first measurement of representation is, therefore: is the VNSA able to continuously supply constituents to keep itself active and meaningful? Such regeneration involves both attracting new members as well as maintaining old ones, and thus assessing a VNSA's representation capacity requires not only looking at the various strategies, tactics and technical measures involved in the actual physical recruitment of new members, but also at critical factors that may support or limit such recruitment: the scope of potential recruits, the group's level of recognition and legitimacy, and its ability to generate loyalty among its members to keep them committed (see [Table 2](#)).

Regeneration

Rather than focus on the technical strategies and tactics for recruiting members to a VNSA, which are too numerous to list and ever-evolving, we may instead consider the underlying support mechanisms for recruitment capacity, the first of which is the scope of potential recruits. A VNSA's regeneration potential is automatically limited if the range of possible group members is narrowly defined. If, for example, the VNSA is, in nature, restricted to a particular ethnic group or a certain geographical region, the membership boundaries are equally restricted. If, on the other hand, a VNSA is ideologically defined, whether on the basis of a religious or political ideology, the pool of potential recruits becomes much larger. For example, the broadly defined Jihadist network has a greater global actorness potential based on its recruitment pool and regeneration scope than does a particular ethnic-based terrorist group like the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK).

The second support mechanism is the building up of recognition and legitimacy, a factor that also played a prominent role in various earlier frameworks, but was generally subsumed under actual legal understandings, which are obviously not the case for most VNSAs. Rather, the VNSA must build up legitimacy *among its members and potential members*. As such, the term does not refer to any kind of qualitative legitimacy among those outside of the group,

Table 2. Elements of VNSA representation

Regeneration			
Attracting members	Maintaining membership	Managing overstretch	
(Recruitment strategies) Building recognition/ establishing legitimacy	Gnerating loyalty	Organizational	Ideological

indeed, outsiders are more likely to scorn—or fear—the VNSA. Legitimacy among the group's (potential) constituents refers to a belief in the VNSA's ability to meet its members' needs, be they needs of providing basic security or financial reward, needs of establishing an independent country, or more philosophical needs like defending members' religion or ideology. Such an understanding of legitimacy can be linked to discussions of how NSAs remain viable entities. As [Rosenau \(1990\)](#) pointed out, while a state's existence is maintained by legal status or sovereignty, actors in the multicentric world have their importance determined by their capability to initiate and sustain actions. The nature of those actions depends of course on the nature and scope of the VNSA's constituency and its goals, but, in every case, the VNSA has to show the ability to act successfully. Success may mean making changes in governmental policies, or it may mean overthrowing a government. For a criminal network, successful recognition and legitimacy for the constituents may mean providing financial reward and protection. Ultimately, the VNSA must present itself as a viable alternative representative of, and provider for, the targeted constituents.

For most VNSAs, achieving such recognition and legitimacy will require the use of illicit actions. On the mild end of such acts, VNSAs may build legitimacy by using resources appropriated illicitly from one market to fund legal (for example, welfare) activities in another. Such acts may allow them to improve their legitimacy and constituency base by cultivating a 'Robin Hood' image in the recipient areas. Examples include groups as diverse as Hamas, of which the majority of their activities can be said to be directed at social, welfare and educational work, to the FARC in Columbia ([Hanson 2009](#)), to drug cartels.³

Acts may also occur at the more violent end of the illicit spectrum. The question of whether violent acts are more or less effective than nonviolent ones in achieving goals and therefore in building up recognition and legitimacy among potential and existing constituents requires looking at the particular VNSA's goals and stage of development. Although the use of violence, in particular, terrorism, has often been concluded to be an ineffective way of achieving goals (for example, [Blackburn 2002](#); [Crenshaw 1995](#)), a number of works have pointed to conditions under which violence may in fact be effective ([Abrahms 2008](#); [Hoffman 1998](#); [Pape 2005](#); [Wilkinson 2000](#)). Indeed, if 'success' is measured not as a full and complete accomplishment of a VNSA's apparent or declared aim (for example, full takeover of a government, total change of a political or ideological system, complete freedom of transport for an illicit good), but rather as partial accomplishment or even just continuation of the VNSA's existence and its daily functions, then success through the use of violence has been shown to be quite effective (for example, [Harmon 2001](#); [Kydd and Walter 2006](#)). Although no precise criterion can be set as a definite prescription for building up legitimacy, in terms of VNSAs gaining initial recognition, there is little question that, in the modern era of 24-hour media coverage, violent acts—the larger the better—generally gain the most attention ([Meadow 2009](#)).

Finally, it should be pointed out that gaining recognition and legitimacy, whether through violent or nonviolent means, has ramifications for both the

³ Pablo Escobar of the Medellin Cartel worked to build up his own 'Robin Hood' image by constructing hospitals and sports facilities ([Escobar and Fisher 2009](#)).

representation and influence factors in this framework. In terms of influence, legitimacy increases when states feel obliged to respond to and thus 'recognize' the VNSA—which will be discussed in more detail below.

Generating loyalty. While attracting new members involves building up recognition and establishing legitimacy, the maintaining of these members can be understood by asking whether the VNSA is able to generate necessary levels of loyalty among its members. As with a term like 'legitimacy', 'loyalty' for members of a VNSA should not be interpreted in any normative positive sense, but rather, is intended to describe the degree and depth to which members feel connected to the group. Depending on the nature of the VNSA and the motivations of its members for belonging, the type of connection felt and therefore the levels of loyalty engendered will vary. Broadly speaking, the greater the connection or 'loyalty' of a VNSA's members, the more that group will be able to maintain its representation, and the greater its potential role may be in global politics.

The issue of loyalty also comes into question when considering the possibility or potential of a broad power shift from states to nonstate actors, since one way of looking at such a shift is to consider the strength of loyalty engendered by these entities in their constituents, and the possibility of movement between them. In other words, is it possible for individuals to maintain equal 'dual loyalties' to both their state and some other nonstate entity, or is there a possibility of 'shifting loyalties' paralleling (or preceding) a shift in polity power?

The argument has been made that traditional loyalties to state and nation are under threat, as individuals shift loyalties to other entities—often NSAs with broad social missions, such as Amnesty International, Doctors without Borders or Greenpeace ([Linklater 1996](#)). The argument seems even stronger if we consider not these modern products of global civil society but more ancient forms of transnational identities, such as the Catholic Church, the Jihadist movement or ethnic background. Ethnicity has been argued by some to be the principal identification factor at the root of differences between groups ([Gurr 1993](#)), and religion has been described as being at the core of individual and group identity because of the 'depth of commitment that religion often inspires and its capacity to speak to the individual's deepest existential concerns' ([Seul 1999, 568](#)). The former modern types of memberships are likely to accommodate dual loyalties; in other words, it is possible to preserve statist loyalties while still experimenting with these alternative new ones; some established or more traditional transnational identities may be less accommodative, and may precede even the statist loyalty. In most cases these older traditional ones also seem to go hand-in-hand with state loyalties, but they may have a greater potential to shift loyalties *away* from the state. So although people would rarely forsake their state in pursuing a loyalty to Doctors without Borders (and normally would never be challenged to do this), someone might consider relinquishing some of their state loyalty for a loyalty they have to a religious, ethnic or ideological identity ([Baron 2009](#)). With respect to commitment, as well, the older types of identities seem to have the advantage over newer ones. Among the new types, there are constantly different options that might draw one's interest and attention, whereas the old established types maintain a monopoly. The rates of *reshifting* loyalties among the new groups themselves is probably greater than among the older forms.

The point is that loyalty is an important factor for any actor, whether a state or a nonstate. In light of questions of loyalty shift, it may be considered that some

loyalties are stronger than others in their ability to produce a sustainable representation. So in terms of 'measuring' the loyalty aspect of representation, we should consider that some types of loyalties will be stronger than others. In the realm of VNSAs, traditional, often ideological constructs are more likely to produce sustainable loyalties than the modern actors of global civil society. The earlier forms have, because of the nature of the ideology and the ancient established norms and procedures, a greater regeneration capacity than more recent forms.

Managing overstretch. Ironically, 'success' in the category of representation may not be solely about attracting and keeping up membership, but also, in some cases, about balancing those efforts with the equally risky potential effects of excessive growth. In other words, with too much regeneration success, the VNSA may become so large and diverse that it becomes difficult to manage effectively, or that it loses the essence of its shared identity, and therefore the bindings that keep it intact and functioning. Should the constituency of a VNSA grow to a point that it becomes difficult both physically and ideologically to control, it could become divided, with the possibility that its separate parts are thereby weakened and no longer able to resist state persecution.

Obviously, the respective challenges of regeneration and overstretch are different for each VNSA depending on the group's particular aims and scope. Those VNSAs with more narrowly focused scope and aims, for example, a local warlord or an ethnic-based terrorist group, are less likely to face great risks of overstretch. However, for VNSAs with global aims and scope, for example, the Jihadists, whose mission requires broad, global regeneration efforts, the risks of overstretch are a genuine factor to consider when assessing their global political potential.

For states or empires, overstretch refers to the phenomenon that occurs when they expand too much territorially. For the deterritorial VNSA, overstretch seems to be a potential in two main ways. At the concrete organizational level, high levels of expansion mean greater challenges in managing the organization's various parts in a secure way. Simply keeping distant cells or factions connected for communication and exchange opens the VNSA up to easier security establishment surveillance and penetration. More cells and factions also mean increased chances of one group making mistakes that may again ease security establishment countering efforts.

Overstretch may also occur on a more ideological level. First, with rapid growth, it becomes more difficult for the VNSA to maintain operational cohesiveness. With more members and subgroups, agreeing on common codes of conduct, target selection, strategies and even what types of act are most appropriate for achieving particular goals, all become more challenging. Possibly most serious for the VNSA are overstretch issues of actual ideological cohesiveness, since divergence on this front speaks to the very identity of the group. Interesting examples of how a VNSA might face such ideological cohesiveness issues and try to deal with them can be seen in the case of the Jihadists. In their early recruitment initiatives during the 1980s in the camps in Afghanistan, they were willing to ignore differences among the recruits, as the movement grew around a presumed shared ideology of Islam. It quickly became apparent, however, that the differences among these aspiring Jihadists from around the globe could prove problematic. The Turkish Jihadists disapproved of

the Yemeni or Saudi Jihadists' religious conduct, and vice versa.⁴ To cope with this problem, the al Qaeda leadership had to keep the various groups separated physically into different camps and with different tasks and missions—while still trying to keep them ideologically bound.

Overall, the factor of 'Representation' on the ARI constitutes a VNSA's ability to manage the fine tension between essential regeneration ability and controlling overstretch in order to maintain organizational security and cohesiveness. Without adequate regenerative capacity there will be no continuity, the VNSA will not be sustainable and it will not remain an actor. Maintaining such a regenerative capacity may be accomplished based on an appeal to an inclusive spirit, such as one based on religion or ideology, or even on a particular purpose (for example, opposition to a political situation). The dilemma of course with such an 'inclusive spirit' is that it must be broad enough to ensure a growing constituency, but narrow enough to keep the actors' members bound together and to allow for reasonable management. For VNSAs with a global aim, ignoring the second part of this balance may pose a genuine threat to the group. Moreover, the potential for overstretch is likely to grow, as developments generally associated with globalization, such as rapid advances in telecommunications and transportation, while they ease the process of reaching out to larger audiences (good for regeneration), also naturally may result in overly broad growth and expansion.

Influence

The third and final factor in this framework for understanding VNSAs' global potential draws on earlier frameworks' inclusion of categories such as 'ability' to employ policy instruments or to implement decisions, or simply 'capacity' and 'capabilities' to be able to make changes in policy. In this case, these practical understandings are encompassed under the heading of 'influence'. Under various labels, 'influence' and the ability to exert it on the international environment is the one criterion that has consistently been asserted as a definitional criterion for nonstate actors: despite their broad range of activities and interests, all nonstate actors are able to exert influence on the international environment through 'agile stateless and resourceful networks' (Moses 2003, 29).

All NSAs, violent or otherwise, would claim to have influence, but assessing or measuring this influence is a difficult task. As noted earlier, past work on NSAs has tended to assess influence by looking for evidence of the NSA being a part of international institutional arrangements and being able to act in ways that affect the processes and outcomes in international politics (for example, Arts et al 2003). These and similar legally based criteria clearly cannot be used directly to evaluate the influence of violent NSAs since, with the exception of paid military organizations, they cannot be a part of international institutional arrangements, nor can they legally affect international politics. However, we can draw on these ideas indirectly to argue that a VNSA could be considered to have 'influence' if it showed evidence of a sustainable capacity, and if it constituted a transformative and compelling challenge to states and the statist system. In essence, such a

⁴Interview with Turkish Jihadist who served in Afghanistan, November 2001, in Istanbul.

Table 3. Elements of VNSA influence

Sustainability	Impact
Deterrent-resistant motivation	Compulsion
Flexibility/adaptability	Transformative capacity

definition of influence breaks down into two elements: sustainability and impact. Each of these may be further divided, as shown in [Table 3](#).

Sustainability. A VNSA's successful sustainability may be linked to two main features: (1) being based on a deterrent-free motivation, and (2) having adequate flexibility and adaptability. The first main source of sustainability (see [Table 3](#)) is linked to the underlying cause or purpose of the VNSA itself. For a violent NSA in particular to be sustainable, given that it is likely to face at minimum resistance if not overt persecution, its constituency must be motivated by a force that is 'deterrent free'. In other words, the present and future members of this NSA must be driven by an idea that will continue to motivate them to action even in the face of potentially extreme opposition from states. Recalling the characteristics of 'illicit authority', such strong motivation is most likely to stem from either money, as in the case of VNSAs involved in criminal activities, or ideology, as in the case of terrorist groups with divine or secular ideological principles. Of the two, both are undoubtedly powerful, but financial motivation runs the risk of being 'outbid' by alternative sources, and is therefore less binding. As discussed above in the section on gaining and maintaining members' loyalty, ideological principles, in particular religious-based ones, have been shown to be the deepest and most binding, and therefore are arguably the most deterrent free.

The second aspect of sustainability is that of being flexible and adaptable. In the face of formidable opposition from states, a VNSA is more likely to survive if it is able and willing to make rapid and significant changes in everything from its strategies and tactics to even its basic organizational principles and practices. An example of how dramatic such changes might be can be seen in the case of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. This one-time secularist Palestinian terrorist organization made an abrupt ideological shift after 2001, when it chose to adopt a religious mission, a move made partly because of the realization that, with a secularist ideology, it was failing to recruit suicide bombers for that was proving to be the most influential means of action.

One way in which VNSAs may need to be flexible and adaptable is by using the transnational space as a medium for basic functions crucial to sustainability—for example, having sources of security, exchange and empowerment—since the transnational space constitutes locations and means that are least accessible to state regulation and control and therefore most convenient for VNSA activity. Transnational space may include both physical spaces (for example, failed states) and nonphysical ones (for example, cyberspace). A VNSA may resort to these transnational spaces for security purposes (for example, to physically hide from authorities), as well as for exchanging ideas, know-how, resources and so on. Such exchanges may again be done in the physical transnational space (for example, transferring money via couriers rather than banks) or the nonphysical (for example, using the Internet for spreading ideas).

Yet another function that might most effectively take place in transnational spaces and serve to increase sustainability is that of building up resources—in other words, empowerment. The transnational space has become increasingly more resourceful for empowerment and armament, an early example being the AQ Khan network, showing how grey areas exist in transnational space and are convenient for empowering activities by VNSAs. Other examples can be seen in small-scale armament. There are a reported 638 million illegal small arms in circulation in the world today. They have been described as ‘cheap, widely available, extremely lethal, simple to use, durable, portable, and concealable’ (Stohl 2005, 21), and are undoubtedly tempting for a VNSA seeking a short cut to influence. Evidence of how the spread of such weapons has proven helpful to VNSAs can be found in the countless numbers of Chinese and Egyptian AK47s that were originally supplied to the Mujahidin during the Afghanistan war and can now be found in the hands of violent extremists throughout the Middle East, Africa and as far away as Southeast Asia (Boutwell 1998). In terms of evaluating a VNSA’s sustainability, obviously the ultimate measure is whether it continues to exist—even in a transformed state—and is able to carry out its activities, despite whatever obstacles are put in its way.

Impact. The second main aspect of influence, impact, can also be further divided into two characteristics: the degree to which the VNSA’s impact is compelling, and the degree to which it is transformative. The first of these refers to the idea of states being compelled to react to this nonstate entity. The VNSA’s actions must be influential enough that states are unable to ignore it; in other words, they must grant recognition to the VNSA—though not in the legal sense—and in essence, in doing so, relinquish to it some of their own power. For nonviolent NSAs, state recognition can be granted either explicitly or implicitly. If the NSA’s position is not challenged by the state, the NSA can be viewed as having implicit legitimacy in a particular issue area (de facto recognition). If states go so far as to openly acknowledge that the NSA is actually *better* able to set policy rules or guidelines in a particular area, they may grant explicit legitimacy and recognition to the NSA (de jure recognition) (Hall and Biersteker 2002, 6). In either case, there is evidence of ceding recognition to the NSA and providing it with powers traditionally reserved to the state (Taylor 1997). Of course neither of the above is an option for VNSAs, which must instead appeal to a third method: creating such a disturbance that states cannot afford to be indifferent to them. Such examples of states being compelled to react to VNSAs can be considered as ‘negative recognition’.

Interestingly, in such cases of VNSAs committing violent acts to seek ‘negative recognition’, we can see a loose connection to the age-old war-making/state-making argument (Tilly 1978, 1990), and thus a copying of age-old patterns of state behaviour. Just as territorial entities waged more traditional wars to become states, some VNSAs may wage asymmetric wars (with terror as the primary method for this warfare⁵) to become fully recognized NSAs. As discussed earlier in the section on building up legitimacy, the question of whether violence is an effective means of action is a complex one. Ultimately, it cannot be answered

⁵ Since VNSAs are the weaker party in any conflict with states, a natural means for them to use is terror—the ancient war-waging ‘weapon for the weak’ (Hoffman 1998, 4).

without considering the VNSA's particular goals. For a financially motivated VNSA with global-level intent, nonviolent strategies may prove more effective (see the comparison of the Cali and Medellín cartels' use of violence in [Williams 1994](#)). For a politically motivated VNSA, however, violent acts are at least likely to produce a state reaction and thus gain the VNSA recognition, the first step to achieving political goals.⁶ Moreover, increasing the level or degree of violence seems to lead to even greater negative recognition.

Suicide terror, for example, represents how greater violence can translate for some groups into further compulsion and thus larger influence. Suicide terror may be viewed as a reinvention by VNSAs of the arms technology race: a consciously selected and purposeful strategy ([Pape 2005](#)). It has been argued that 'terrorists have come to realize that the tactic of suicide terrorism increases their success rate in attaining a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland' (4). In a sense, these terrorists have produced a powerful alternative weapon: one with full dedication attached to it. With this weapon they are able to achieve a level of influence in international relations that states cannot easily reach despite all their organized resources. Further ratcheting up of violence, indeed, the ultimate empowerment of VNSAs may come in the form of seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). With access to WMDs, a VNSA could potentially deny states the ability to provide their 'primary responsibility', that is, security, to their citizens and thereby break down the state-society relationship and shatter one of the primary reasons why the idea of state was first conceived ([Mendelsohn 2005](#)). With more than 244 incidents of chemical or biological terrorism having taken place in 26 countries since the First World War, it is not hard to believe claims of the inevitability that VNSAs will continue to seek WMDs to increase their influence ([Allison 2004](#), [Tucker 2000](#)). In terms of what WMD possession would mean for the influence potential of a VNSA, it has been said that it would represent 'ultimate capability' ([Falkenrath 2000](#), 21), and, in the case of a nuclear weapon in particular, would have an 'extraordinary psychological impact on the target audience', that would immediately change the status and image of the holder.

The second aspect to impact is that it must be transformative. This may mean leading to changes in a state's or states' policies and practices (for example, in border patrol, immigration policies, security measures) or to changes in a particular state's authority (for example, in the case of an insurgent group or national-based terrorist organization creating an autonomous region or dividing a country or overthrowing a government). Ultimately, a VNSA with the greatest and

⁶ In cases where nonviolent groups have successfully negotiated political change, it has to be recognized that the targeted states/societies have generally not come to the negotiation table or decided to make concessions in a 'nonviolent vacuum'. Rather, there is usually a violent alternative group or the potential of the nonviolent group turning violent, which leads them to change. In other words, the influence of the nonviolent group increases because of the possibility of violent alternatives waiting in the wings, or the possibility of the nonviolent actor becoming violent itself. For example, Sinn Féin was 'better' than the IRA, Arafat gained acceptance in the presence of Hamas, the political wing of the Basque separatists was preferred to the military one, and even Martin Luther King could be seen as having gained strength from his position as a better alternative to Malcolm X or the Black Panthers.

most global transformative influence would be one that presents such a credible threatening capacity that it leads to transformations in the primary tenets of the state-centric system (Hall and Biersteker 2002; Steinberg 2004). For example, it might carry the potential to affect substantively the organizing principle of the state-centric system, sovereignty, or major alignment patterns, or international legal regime understandings or the distribution of capabilities within the state system. With respect to the last of these, for example, it has been argued that NSAs, by refusing to gather around any fixed pole, can play an important role in making the notion of polarity obsolete (Pearlstein 2004). The question to be asked when judging a VNSA's ultimate transformative influence might be, therefore, is the actor *really* challenging the principles of statehood and the state-centric system?

VNSAs may certainly have a significant impact on that principle of statehood—sovereignty (Nagan and Hammer 2004). Even the most developed state may struggle when confronting the impact of a VNSA (Paul 2005), and state-based international regimes and regulations are struggling to incorporate VNSA challenges. Traditional international law and norms such as those prescribed under the United Nations (UN) Charter concern themselves only with the use of armed force by a state against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or independence of another state (Maogoto 2005). Because of this, states are now forced to reevaluate the long-standing understanding that only a state has the capacity to commit such an armed attack. Accordingly, one of the most pressing issues has been whether the concept of armed attack pursuant to article 51 of the UN Charter extends to attacks by VNSAs, in the absence of state complicity. Even though the sovereignty debate is controversial, with some arguing that state sovereignty is being eroded and others that it is being only transformed but is ultimately resilient, that debate is of minimal importance here. Whether sovereignty is being transformed or eroded, if it can be shown that an NSA, particularly a violent one, may have a significant input in this change, then the change alone would be evidence of the NSA's influence. Basically, if a state—in particular a powerful state—begins to act differently because of the actions of an NSA, that NSA can be said to be an influential one at the global level and can be considered to have greater potential for global actorness.

Future use of the ARI

In considering the potential actorness of VNSAs, a few initial points need to be emphasized. First, NSA actorness in general cannot and should not be ignored. NSAs existed long before states, they have continued to exist during the relatively new era of statist hegemony and all evidence suggests that they will continue to play a role in global affairs. Although debate will certainly continue over whether NSAs will ever supersede states in terms of power and influence, there is no question that NSAs have proven their capacity to remain a constant, influential actor in global affairs.

Second, nonstate actorness is evolving, and the evolution of NSAs is serving to help restructure global politics. These 'sovereignty-free' actors are not only able to act autonomously, but also to act with a huge potential for innovative and evolutionary capacity, giving them the potential to expand a political universe that

was previously shaped by mostly statist practices. A transnationally expanding political universe, in return, enlarges the political and physical contexts that enable even further autonomy, representation and influence for the NSAs.

Finally, power, both in terms of its nature and the means for accessing it, has also been transforming. Human-centric (as opposed to state-centric) entities, both individuals and groups, are becoming increasingly powerful. In terms of their means and mechanisms of power, NSAs clearly have not yet reached their limits. For example, the combining of asymmetric strategies and approaches with the means of nuclear weapons remains a possibility that has not yet been materialized. With nonstate armament still in its youth, we cannot yet know the limits of violent nonstate actorness potential, for using—or misusing—power.

Given the importance of NSAs, their changing nature, and their evolving role in global politics, dynamic frameworks of analysis are needed both to trace the historical trajectories in the evolution of violent nonstate actorness (preferably by examining past cases with global claims, such as Anarchists, pirates and religious extremists), but also to identify emerging patterns by examining modern-day cases such as today's Jihadists. With VNSAs likely to become more instrumental actors of the statist game, such frameworks can also help us understand emerging patterns of interaction among VNSAs and states (for example, alliances), which are bound to become a crucial aspect for understanding present and future global politics.

The ARI framework presented here aims to serve as a starting point to achieving the above purposes. Using the ARI, single cases of violent nonstate actorness can be assessed, and comparative case analyses can be made to identify distinctions between different VNSAs and to offer insights into their relative ability to 'matter' on a global level. The ARI provides a common structure allowing for such cross analyses among VNSAs even when fundamental differences exist in these groups' objectives, goals or histories. For example, a comparison of the Russian mafia with a terrorist group like the Jihadists might reveal similar levels of autonomy but less representation potential for the Russian mafia because it is financially motivated and its scope of potential recruits is more limited. Moreover, since the mafia does not overtly go after the state system, it is less of a threat and therefore may have less compulsion and transformative capacity. Comparative historical case studies can explore changing patterns of evolution and progress within violent nonstate actorness. Or, taking again the example of the modern-day Jihadists, but in this case comparing them with the nineteenth/twentieth century-Anarchists might reveal answers to such questions as why the Anarchists, when sent into exile, were unable to regroup their constituency, whereas the Jihadists were able to turn the most remote exiles into an advantage—arguably even into a strategy for developing further autonomy. Such a comparison might also provide insights into the extent of the overstretch risk potential, by showing what has happened over the past century to the common identity of the Anarchists, and what the implications of this change have been on the group's influence.

The ARI framework may also make it possible to assess the changing global context by seeing how various contextual inputs qualitatively affect autonomy, representation and influence, the building blocks of evolving VNSA actorness. Global contextual factors can be assessed and categorized more easily and effectively within the ARI framework, for example, determining which specific

dimensions of globalization, from communications to accessibility to weapons, are having the greatest effect on NSAs' autonomy, representation and influence.

Drawing on the subitemized categories of the ARI framework may also provide insights into which of these (autonomy, representation, influence) are comparatively more important for making significant leaps in establishing the actorness of an NSA in global politics. For example, is autonomy more important than representation? Can an NSA have influence without established representation? The ARI framework may not only provoke such questions, but also provide a means of trying to assess answers to them.

Finally, such insights into the evolutionary patterns of VNSAs and assessments about which factors may be most important in establishing a VNSA's actorness, may also help in assessing individual VNSA cases and then designing effective countering strategies. Such analyses may begin to help states cope with the dilemma they often face, namely, that countering strategies designed and conducted as emergency responses rather than carefully analysed 'root cause' responses, are themselves likely to feed into the autonomy, representation and influence potential of the VNSA. The ARI framework might allow more long-term (root cause) responses by structuring focused analyses of how to address a particular VNSA's autonomy, representation and influence.

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