

Political Science 972: International Conflict
Discussion Questions for Week 13
Militarized Non-State Actors

1. To what extent are there commonalities and differences between the “warlords” of today and the pre-Westphalian actors that we looked at last week? What about other militarized non-state actors (MNSAs) such as transnational terrorist movements, notably al-Qaeda? What is to say, is there anything to be learned from the medieval period about MNSAs?—note that it might apply to some forms of MNSA but not to others.

2. Is globalization “unwinding” the Westphalian transition—the factors that once led to the nominal primacy of the nation-state are now being systematically dismantled, more or less in reverse—or are there other processes going on? Going outside of the readings, to what extent could the current rise of MNSAs be compared to periods of imperial decline such as the late Roman empire and the various inter-dynastic periods of “chaos” found in Chinese history?

3. Using the various articles, evaluate the extent to which we’ve got a systematic theory of MNSAs. How about warlords (keeping in mind it was pulling teeth to find sufficient readings on this topic)? To what extent can we make cross-cultural generalizations about these? What, if anything, is the systematic relationship between “terrorist groups” (national and transnational) and “warlords.”

4. On finishing your degree, you look at your job prospects and figure, oh, what the heck, things aren’t looking very promising, so I’m going to become a warlord. How would you go about this—outline a “How To…” guide, or I suppose as *Warlordship for Idiots* guide for the prospect warlord.

Conversely (and more realistically), on finishing your degree you find yourself in the military and are deployed in an area where warlords are operating. How would you (a) make things so difficult for them that they can no longer function or (b) accommodate them so that they no longer make life difficult for you and (c) decide which of these strategies to follow.

5. Evaluate the extent to which warlords can be considered (a) economic actors; (b) heroic military actors (that is, appealing to the heroic warrior model); (c) political actors and (d) traditional cultural structures. To what extent is this consistent across cultures; to what extent is it consistent across time. In particular, using the assigned readings, contrast the economic “rational” models (for example Olson, Collier and Hoeffler, Fearon, Mehlum et al) and the more cultural/historical approaches (Peters, Tarzi).

6. Evaluate the relative contribution of changes in (a) military technology (for example the mass production of automatic weapons); (b) economic globalization (for example global markets for illegal drugs, diamonds and human trafficking) and (c) ideology (variation of the [perceived] effects of *Clash of Civilizations*) on contemporary warlords and MNSAs more generally. What if anything are the trends in these changes, and possible counter-balancing to those trends. Is the contemporary MNSA situation temporary as the system will adapt and suppress these, or are we seeing the beginnings of a large-scale change?

7. Using Peters' article as a starting point, and noting that Peters doesn't seem overly fond of folks involved in MNSAs, are there differences between warlords and the typical urban criminal street gang? Note that the rhetorical tendency in dealing with warlords who are country doesn't like is to call them "criminals": how accurate is this (or can one generalize at all). Conversely, is the only difference between a warlord and a state a bit of public relations and a flag? Or, more generally, is there some reasonable coherent classification scheme—something more subtle than "unwashed loser criminal scum" vs "patriotic military professionals"—on which one can classify various MNSAs and their members? Keep in mind that such a scheme may have multiple dimensions.

8. Using Olson and Mehlum et al as a starting point, agree or disagree (or rather, "discuss"): "The level of militarized political organization cannot go below a certain level, since as the power of the state weakens, alternative MNSAs will quickly arise to fill the gap and restore some semblance of order. The result of a 'state failure' is not chaos but simply a decentralization of power."

9. Are there likely to be differences in the structure of MNSAs depending on whether a state collapses from the center—that is, the central government suddenly loses power, typically due to an attempted coup or revolution—versus a situation where the state gradually loses power in the periphery but retains it in the center. Provide examples of each pattern, both historically and in the contemporary system. Are there ways of anticipating, for example from the distribution of economic resources or existing political, ethnic or social structures, which pattern is likely to occur?

10. Quite a few of these articles were written in the early 1990s as a response, presumably, to Somalia, West Africa (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and the Balkans. What, if anything, have we learned from subsequent experience, for example Afghanistan, Congo, and Iraq?

11. [modification of a question from the first week of class] For Ibn-Khaldun (and to a large extent, William McNeil), the fundamental dynamic in conflict is that of the herders and agriculturalists (who, in turn, support cities). Herders are physically strong, mobile, and "natural warriors" but have very limited technology. Cities (and their supporting farms) are wealthy but a sedentary life does not produce good warriors. Hence for Ibn Khaldun, history is a continual sequence of nomads conquering urban areas, being absorbed by those areas culturally, and after a few generations becoming vulnerable to other nomads. Do warlords, particularly those dependent on an economic base of illegal goods such as narcotics and human trafficking, constitute a modern analogue to this conflict: the attempt by governments ban goods for which there is a demand will provide a source of revenue for groups operating outside the control of such governments?