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17.586 Warlords, Terrorists, and Militias: Theorizing on Violent Non-State Actors
Spring 2009

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Week 2: WARLORDS

INTRODUCTION

Warlords are a bit of an ontological nightmare for old-fashioned Westphalian international relations scholars (like myself). Explaining and analyzing Warlords (and violent non-state actors [VNSAs] in general) requires a drastic evolution of the international relations framework to incorporate both the formation of VNSAs and the dynamics of their competition with each other and with the state. The implications for policy-making are challenging at best.

READINGS

- **Stephen Chan, “The Warlord & Global Order.”**

Chan sees Warlords as providing alternatives to state administration and order; they use force to maintain their region, and tradition, myth, and charisma to create a “legitimation of style.” Specifically, Warlords gain support by providing three normative values: values (beliefs and identities), needs (physical, like food; but also dignity, etc), and traditions (which become and feed off institutions), incorporating people maligned or ignored by society. He outlines six types of Warlords (Local, Enlarged Frontier Locality, International Crime, Client/Dependent, Resistance Leader, and Liberation Leader), and emphasizes that realist international relations do not incorporate Warlord dynamics or their beliefs.

The paper is mostly descriptive and suggestive to other scholars, and the descriptions of Warlords are compelling, if sometimes vague.

- **Paul Rich, “Emergence & Significance of Warlordism in International Politics”**

Rich maps warlords on two axes: power (between limited ethnic/clan formations, and extensive regional following [prestige, political power]), and engagement level (between banditry/gangsterism, and regional/secessionist movement with nationalist/proto-nationalist aspirations). They emerge from fractured societies/ failed states with economic and political instability, and represent a form of praetorianism. They fight wars of the “third kind,” without territorial boundaries, but with formal military campaigns, rituals, and combined military/political operations. Rich also believes that Warlords pose a major threat to the very notion of the Westphalian nation-state and Western notions of sovereignty, saying that states in Africa have largely failed. He insists that a more “proto-state” model is required, and that the UN/World Bank must begin to deal (at least informally) with Warlords and accept that arbitrary boundaries are not working.

Rich's quick jump to the conclusion that the demise of the nation-state might be around the corner is perhaps hasty. Western and even Asian nation-states emerged hundreds of years ago and, went through mass industrialization as well as hundreds of years of wars that changed borders, moved/killed populations, and created rules of conduct before these states became particularly stable. Indeed, Africa's states are largely arbitrary post-Colonial constructs, and insisting to hold on to current borders and institutions is contributing to the instability of Africa, but it is unlikely a sign of the failure of the concept of the state itself.

- **Alice Hills, “Warlords, Militia, and Conflict in Contemporary Africa”**

Hills defines and explores both Warlords and Militias. She explains that Warlords used to be defined as leaders that controlled an area with forces obedient to them; but the usage of the word now includes clan/tribal/factional leaders that use armed civilians to impose their ideas/ambitions on a population or territory. Chinese Warlords of the 1910s often sought legitimacy and were happy to receive

governorship or work for the state; modern African warlords have no such interest (besides, perhaps, Aided); though modern Warlords also utilize foreign aid, have strong personal ambitions, and display high self-confidence. Militias were formerly semi-legitimate reservists/retainers, but the term now includes non-state armed groups with a particular loyalty or common goal (work for a warlord, protection of a clan, or banditry). Militias can be large, present, and powerful (like the Afghani Taliban of 1994) or local and obedient to the state (like Eritrian militias of the 1980s). Militias form in the “Hobbesian Mafia-Capitalism” of post-breakdown failed states, and lead to a vicious cycle of instability. They are casual about violence and fluid in alliances, but can serve law-enforcement roles in absence of the state.

- **Stergios Skaperdos, “Warlord Competition”**

Skaperdos models Warlords as purely economic actors, looking to maximize the amount of “rent” and “tax” they can extract from producers and resources on their turf. Skaperdos utilizes 2 models, the local competition and global free-for-all models to describe the cost-benefit analysis and equilibrium profit of a risk-neutral Warlord. The free-for-all model describes a devastating level of competition for resources and a high reduction in production that makes competition a much more destructive outcome. Additionally, Skaperdos describes that the fighting causes a basic destruction of production that can be so great that cooperation becomes an unquestionably more profitable option—this leads to peace.

The Skaperdos model is interesting in that it describes general conditions in which warlords compete and cooperate, as well as potential outcomes for the Warlord, but has highly constraining assumptions as to Warlord motivations and loyalties, and also does little to explain whether Warlords will arise (due to the extraction rate and warrior pay rate being unexplained).

- **Leonard Wantchekon, “The Paradox of 'Warlord' Democracy”**

Wantchekon models a civil war between Warlords as a “game,” that ends if both sides selection an option (Leviathan or Democracy) that is not the status quo. There are a number of steps to the creation of a state after the game's end conditions are selected, but they all ultimately end in the factions choosing how to extract and split resources, and the citizens choosing how much to invest in the state. Wantchekon says that Warlords will cooperate to create democracy when citizen investment is vital to the economy, citizens' preferences ensure neutral/unbiased political selection (over that of a Leviathan, who is arbitrary), and/or an external agency can assure even disarmament.

This model is highly simplified, and largely ignores many of the reasons that competing theorists are skeptical of post-war democracies. Many civil wars that go through agreements to create Democracies either fail immediately or after a weak Democracy has formed. Mutual security concerns make disarmament difficult even with oversight that is not both credibly neutral and effective, and minority factions may find themselves unwilling to accept the outcome of an unconstrained democracy.

- **Troy S. Thomas & Stephen D. Kiser, “Lords of the Silk Route”**

Thomas/Kiser develop a broad and generalized theory on the formation of warlords inside Central Asia (and elsewhere). The model has four sources (resource scarcity, demographic pressure, poverty, corruption/crime), transformations (failed government and identity cleavages), and a large array of groups that emerge to provide services, security, and civil society, most of which reinforce the original sources of instability. The authors assert that the rise of warlords in this way is a serious threat to regional and international security that larger powers are not prepared to deal with, and that the transnational security issues that are sources of instability must be understood and coped with by policymakers. Local Warlords in particular are greedy, fluid (changing alliances), non-uniformed, and irregular. Elaborations and examples of the sources, transformations, and groups in the model are extensive. The paper's analytical model of Warlordism is a strong example of IR theory.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

What are Warlords?

Definitions of Warlords (as well as militias) are intentionally vague. Chan and Rich agree specifically that Warlords provide an alternative to state citizenship (including provision of goods and security), whether voluntary or coerced, and thus bring question to sovereignty. The use of the term Warlord ranges from gangsters to leaders of independence movements, and (obviously) refers to leaders in some way of armed groups that are loyal only to them. Chan asserts that Warlords are largely leaders by charisma and myth; Hills reinforces this idea with evidence that Warlords have a particular self-confidence that lends itself to theatrics and love for media attention. Are all VNSAs led by a Warlord of some sort, or are there conditions in which the strategic leader of a VNSA is not a Warlord? Must Warlords be the final level of obedience, or can some followers of a Warlord have a higher obedience to a state/polity/organization (as, perhaps, is the case of Chinese Warlords in the 1910s)? How have Warlords changed over time, and why?

What Conditions Allow Warlords to Arise?

There is a fair amount of consensus on what conditions at least allow Warlords to arise: failed states. Failed states are, generally: states that cannot secure legitimacy, provide political goods, or provide security for their citizens. Hills, Rich, and Thomas/Kiser largely agree that ethnic factioning, weak institutions, poverty, and government corruption lead to the anarchy necessary for Warlords to arise. Warlords can provide security and provisions when the state cannot, or exploit unarmed citizens for their resources. Why do some relatively weak states spawn warlords, where others don't?

What motivates Warlords?

Skaperdos and Rich/Chan/Hills have stark disagreements on how to model Warlord motivations. Skaperdos and Wantchekon see Warlords as mostly economic actors that are rational and motivated by personal greed; Rich, Chan, and Hills see Warlords either as ideological/political leaders, or security-motivated ethnic/clan leaders trying to protect their community. Surely many Warlords engage in some combination of forwarding a political agenda and trying to make profit for themselves—some are likely corrupted from the former to the latter. Are there signals that can help us to tell whether a Warlord is a political investor, or a brigand fighting for profit?

How do Warlords Interact with Each Other and the State?

Warlords can choose to fight over resources (money, political power, turf), or cooperate. Skaperdos and Wantchekon provide economic and political motivations (respectively) for warlords and non-state actors to fight and cooperate. Skaperdos' economic motivations depend on the deadweight loss of conflict versus the potential gains of winning the conflict all-out. Wantchekon says that Warlords will cooperate to create democracy when citizen investment is vital to the economy, citizens' preferences ensure neutral/unbiased political selection (over that of a Leviathan), and/or an external agency can assure even disarmament. Because Watchekon models governance largely as a means for resource extraction, both forms of cooperation begin to look very similar. But what of Warlords that exist for more security-related reasons? What conditions cause them to cooperate, rather than compete in a security dilemma?

What Implications do Warlords Have on Traditional Notions of Sovereignty and Int'l Relations?

Rich has a very pessimistic view of the future of Westphalian sovereignty; he sees the rise of modern warlords as a radical break from the Nation-State, and requiring radical changes in policy lest the problem become a pandemic. Is this likely? Can the nation-state hold on in Africa, and elsewhere? What needs to be done to stabilize Warlord-ridden regions?