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EDITORIAL

Studying Insurgencies

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To come to terms with how insurgencies come about, how they seek different types of relationship with local populations and why people chose to join them we must acknowledge that many current insurgencies do not fit established analytical categories anymore. In his examination of the diversity of armed insurgencies in Africa at the end of the twentieth century, Christopher Clapham (1998: 6-7) distinguished between four broad groups of armed insurgencies. In his typology, the groups were divided into 1. liberation insurgencies (such as the anti-colonial nationalist movements (e.g. Mau Mau in Kenya); 2. separatist insurgencies (e.g. the Eritrean People's Liberation Front); 3. reform insurgencies (e.g. Museveni's National Resistance Army in Uganda; 4. warlord insurgencies (e.g. Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia and Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone).

Clapham's typology was extremely useful, but the majority of recent insurgencies do not easily fit into the categories above – the only one that still is much

referred to is the 'warlord' insurgencies, and even that one has lost most of its acclaimed analytical value (see Bøås and Dunn 2017). Thus, while Clapham's 1998 collection is still one of the very best attempts to study insurgencies in a comparative manner, the external and internal environments of contemporary insurgencies have changed significantly, and the characteristics, dynamics and contexts of insurgencies are therefore clearly not the same across time and space.

However, it has been argued that for insurgent groups the objective of armed conflict is not the defeat of the enemy in battle, but the continuation of fighting for profit (Keen 2000). While it is important to acknowledge the complex ways in which insurgencies have been exploiting opportunities provided to them by transformations in the global economy, explanations primarily focusing on the economic agendas of armed actors are highly problematic. Such a myopic focus may help explain how some conflicts are sustained, but it rarely tells us much about why conflicts start in the first place. It would be a mistake, for example, to assume that the recent wars in Central and West Africa started as a competition over control of alluvial diamonds, coltan and other natural resources or that the current conflict in the Sahel is only a by-product of the collusion of the forces of transnational crime and regional/international Jihadists that has produced a regional crime-terror nexus (see Bøås 2015a).

In both Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the integration of the extraction and marketing of natural resources to the conflicts only occurred once the conflicts were well under way. Similarly, while there is no doubt that illicit goods are transported across the Sahel, there is also a wide spectrum of projects of political and social resistance at play in the same area – some peaceful, others armed. Some of these projects have a rather secular origin, while others are anchored to religious inspirations, some of these are also involved in the transport

and protection of illicit goods. Some of those involved in this business are mainly profit-seeking actors; others mainly aim to fund resistance projects. However, many are also involved in various minor roles in both smuggling operations and resistance projects as a coping strategy (Bøås 2015b). Nor does an exclusive focus on illicit goods or natural resource extraction explain why these incentives have come to play such an important part in recent wars: that is, the economic agenda research assumes the profit motive on the part of the belligerents without exploring why or to what extent political-military actors become profit-seeking, market-based actors. To understand this transformation, we need to take into account political, cultural and historical factors in addition to the economic dimension to conflict. This is precisely where the essays in this special issue has much to offer: its emphasis on the need to always contextualise conflict and conflict economies indeed helps us approaching insurgencies as a broad field of relational agents that dynamically attempt to navigate an evolving field - a field that is at the same time constantly changing and deeply entrenched in the politics of people and place that spans decades and centuries. This should be evident even if, obviously, economic agendas are an integral part of contemporary insurgent warfare.

1. Understanding insurgency violence

To understand insurgencies and the insurgents involved in them in the Global South, we need a more nuanced understanding of what war and violence are all about (see Shelby Ward in this volume that reminds us about the intimate relationship between violence and nation-building). The conflicts are most often deeply embedded in the history of people and place, and not only in colonial history and the transformation to independent states, but in the totality of history. Recent and distant pasts relate in direct, albeit also sometimes in rather unexpected ways, to on-

going processes of social change. For example, many of the events and relationships that characterise Africa's recent history – including politics and political violence – are intimately entangled in people's perceptions of their social and ethnic identities. These identity perceptions are social constructions; representations that change over time and are often distorted and manipulated, particularly as part of discourses of domination emanating from those in power in successive colonial and postcolonial regimes (see Atkinson 1994).

Armed struggle has always been in a constant state of flux. As new technologies, strategies, and pathways to resistance emerge, existing insurgencies attempt to adapt while new ones emerge (see Francesco Buscemi in this volume). Global and regional forces – be they political, economic, or social – impact on the context of the armed struggles in multiple, and often unpredictable, ways. In some cases, local causes of conflicts become interconnected, intertwined, and layered to produce a constantly shifting landscape. It is therefore important to acknowledge that armed insurgencies are not only forces of disorder, but equally parts of emerging systems of governance (see Sara Merabti in this volume). In fact, what we see today, in the cases where armed insurgencies exist over a prolonged period of time, is that a monopolised system of governance has either broken completely down or weakened to the extent that competing systems have emerged (Bøås and Dunn 2017).

These new systems are characterised by flexibility and adaptability, where actors compete for the role of the nodal point in between various networks of attempted informal governance. Such networks collaborate but also compete. At times they even are in violent conflict with each other over the issue of control. The fluidity of these networks can be reflected in the continuing existence – but changing function – of regional and local 'big men' within these armed insurgencies. In

many conflict-prone societies new forms and increasing degree with which these 'big men' (and their networks of governance) are connected to other regional and international networks and markets, further lead to the emergence of networks that are increasingly characterised by their adaptability and pragmatic shifting of alliances.

Regardless of the internal dynamics, new networks of power and rule are constructed that challenge – and replace – existing systems of governance. What we see are complex political configurations that have shifted away from monopolised systems of governance and patronage to one characterised by a multitude of shifting alliances due to the completion between actors and networks of patronage. The consequence of this for a research agenda that aim to understand violent conflict and the involvement of armed non-state actors therein, is that it is confronted with a field of constant flux and fragmentation. In such an intellectual endeavour, the important dimension to keep track is less the very agents of violence: but rather, the nodal points in these networks of governance and violence, and their ability to maintain networks across space and time should increasingly come under the spotlight (Bøås and Dunn 2017).

Thus, if we take recent conflict trends as a guide to the future, the field is and will continue to be characterised by complicated conflicts in politically difficult terrains. Conflicts where there is no clear endgame in sight, and where United Nations (UN)' missions or other international peace-building interventions will be left to grapple with weak states, increasingly unpopular national leaders with low levels of legitimacy. Such missions and interventions may therefore easily end up fighting or attempting to control insurgents that are not only hard to beat militarily, but also that have agendas which leaves little if any room for a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Such conflicts will also most likely take place in areas of the world where

local livelihoods are under pressure from a number of external shocks, including increased climatic variability, and the states in question are rarely seen as an actor able to offer local populations much support. Often it will be the opposite: the state(s) are seen as part of the problem and not the solution (see Alessio Iocchi in this volume).

This 'messiness' of things to come is easily observable in a number of areas in which the UN and the international community at large are engaged in by means of various peace operations such as in Afghanistan, the border areas between Iraq and Syria and the Sahel. Here international stabilisation efforts often come short as they fail to comprehend local contexts as well as perceptions of conflict and conflict resolution (see Laura Berlingozzi in this volume). Even if all of these conflict areas come with their own set of unique challenges, there are also certain commonalities that need to be thought through carefully. Thus, even if underlying cleavages and conflict lines may be relatively permanent, we are also currently faced with a new type of insurgencies that does not fit very well with the established conceptual categories. These new 'insurgents' that we can observe in parts of Africa and the Middle East are not uniquely fighting for national liberation, involved in a separatist struggle, have a revolutionary character in the traditional sense, nor are they just a warlord profit-maximising operation. However, even if they are none of these, they also contain traces of each and every one of them.

2. A new wave of insurgencies?

The conflict zone of the Mali-Sahel periphery offers an apt illustration of the arguments made above. It is crisscrossed by a number of old cleavages. Some date back to precolonial times as is the case of the relationship between the Tuareg of Mali and the black majority population. This cleavage, however, has frozen as

successive series of regimes in Bamako have been unable to unpack the contractions colonialism created when a previous elite trade-and-warrior group, e.g. the Tuareg was turned into a permanent political minority. after Mali gained independence from France. Others have a more contemporary origin, but still create considerable regional ramifications as is the case of groups that lost the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, but has transformed themselves into regional insurgencies, i.e., al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The Sahel also undoubtedly consists of states lacking in state capacity as well as legitimacy. It is an area of the world where local livelihoods are under immense pressure due to a combination of increased climatic variability and the inability of both the states in the region and the international community to react forcefully and adequately to this. This part of the world is a much used passage for weapons and drugs as well as people trying to get out of Africa (see for example Shaw and Tinti 2014), and a number of insurgencies are active in the region, both Jihadist and secular organisations.

However, this does not mean that the Sahel has become the prototype of a 'new war' – a war that takes place in an 'ungoverned space' constituted by a nexus of transnational crime and global terrorism. This part of the world is not without certain levels of order and governance, yet these levels are also clearly of another type than the one that students read about in standard political science textbooks. Instead, what we need to draw attention to is the dense conglomeration of overlapping and competing 'big men' networks of informal/illicit trade, governance and resistance that exists in this area. These operates as networks based on personal power as the 'attainment of big man status is the outcome of a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd and attract him a coterie of loyal, lesser men' (Sahlins 1963: 289). These networks vary in depth, geographical reach and

ability to penetrate the state, but all of them are unstable, changing and constantly adaptable, and while they rest on some sort of common interests, participants do not necessarily share the same goals or have similar reasons for being involved.

The elevation to 'big man' status does not follow one universal path. It varies in time and space and it can be based on different combinations of power. However, in an area such as this where authority is always contested, it must include the ability to use force, to generate resources and not the least to locate authority in and between the state and the informal. The example of the Sahel 'big man' Ibrahim Ag Bahanga illustrates this. Ag Bahanga embarked on his 'big man' career during the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s as a lesser rebel leader, and gained control of a commune (division of local government) after the rebellion ended. He was involved in trade and smuggling; he led other rebellions, and at the same time, until his death in August 2011 maintained relationships with neighbouring governments, e.g. Algeria and Libya, as well as with certain segments of the Malian government and administration. Thus, his status as a 'big man' was not only based on one of these activities, but the totality of them and thereby his ability to, if not control, at least influence and maintain different and also partly overlapping networks that in their own right do not have much commonality with regard to long-term objectives and strategy (Bøås 2015b).

Some of these networks and the 'big men' involved are therefore mainly about criminality (and coping), whereas others make use of such activities to finance various projects of resistance (secular and religious). This may bring different networks and their 'big men' into conflict with each other, but conflict at certain times does not prevent collaboration and collusion during other times and circumstances, thus suggesting that a nexus of transnational crime and global terrorism does not exist in a form that makes it possible to depict it as a fixed entity with permanent

organisational features. Rather, the logic of these operations and networks involved is ambiguity and flexibility, and the actors involved are 'flexians' who adapt themselves and their resources to ever-changing circumstances in the terrain in which they operate (see also Wedel 2009 or Guichaoua 2011).

This does not mean that plasticity is total. Certain relationships and networks are not only more possible than others, but also more permanent. Ethnicity and kinship may matter, but so do the dangers of certain relationships, no matter how profitable they may be. One example is the networks of the Jihadist Mokhtar Belmokhtar. It is reasonable to claim that most of this more secular-oriented criminal networks vanished the moment he took responsibility for the In Aménas attack in Algeria in January 2013. This did not make doing business with him less profitable per se, but it certainly made it too dangerous.

What the examples above suggest is that the logic of the relationship between criminality, coping and resistance in the Sahel periphery to a certain degree can be described as 'ships passing in the night', but certain 'ships' pass each other more frequently than others. Nonetheless, what this leaves us with is a scenario where different competing 'big men' vie for the role of nodal points in different networks of informal governance: some mainly profit-driven, others combining income-generating strategies with social and political objectives (social and religious), yet other simply aiming to come (and hopefully thrive in the future). As the very constellation of these networks is changing, these acts and behaviours are therefore organised, but without much of formal or permanent organisation attached to it. This makes it possible to combine various strategies of criminality, cooping and resistance without necessarily losing sight of either immediate or long-term objectives. The outcome is a narrative-driven space of co-existence, collusion and conflict in

which the conflation of different actors' interests, ideas and actions only will lead to analytical confusion as well as misguided policy prescriptions (Bøås 2015b).

This is therefore the social landscape in which a new wave of insurgencies seems to thrive. One example of such an insurgency is AQIM. This insurgency is often viewed as one of the major lynchpins in the 'crime-terror nexus' that has taken advantage of the 'ungoverned space' of the Mali-Sahel periphery. Seen as an operational branch of the global al-Qaeda structure, it is viewed as an organisation that preys on the instability of the region to finance its criminal terrorist activities. However, if we look beyond AQIM's global rhetoric, a slightly different picture emerges. AQIM has clear strategies of integration in the Sahel that are based on a sophisticated reading of the local context that enables the organisation to appropriate local grievances and cleavages. The group's members also know how to combine the strength of its money, guns and prayers. The latter is of particular importance in an area where local state administration, to the extent that it exists, is generally perceived by the local population as corrupt, whereas AQIM operatives present themselves as honest and pious Muslims (see also Bleck and Michelitch 2015).

AQIM's point of origin is the Algerian civil war. Its predecessor, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), was formed by Hassan Hattab as a breakaway faction of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), mainly as a reaction to the immense and senseless violence of the GIA in the latter years of the Algerian civil war. Officially, GSCP moved into northern Mali in 2003-2004, but they already had rear bases in the area since 1998 (Bøås and Torheim 2013). The relationship between GSCP and al-Qaeda is not straightforward, as this is a history of statements of mutual collaboration, but also of open conflict. When GSCP was established in 1998, the organisation expresses support for al-Qaeda, only to claim that it had broken away from al-.Qaeda in 2001(see ICG 2005). GSCP reaffirmed its loyalty in

2003, was blessed by al-Qaeda in 2006, and then finally embraced the al-Qaeda banner in 2007 when GSCP changed its name to AQIM (see Rollins 2010).

The GSCP may have done this for ideological reasons, but more pragmatic brand concerns also played a role. They had little to lose and possibly a lot to gain from taking up the al-Qaeda banner: it would make them look more global and powerful in the eyes of local communities than they actually were at the time.

However, when AQIM started to materialise in Northern Mali, it had more than a potent brand name. The AQIM fighters also had money; their main source of wealth originated from hostage taking, particularly the kidnapping of 32 German tourists in 2003. These tourists were captured when travelling through the Sahara and were held hostage for several months before they were released. AQIM used its new-found wealth wisely, trading with local communities, but also re-distributing money, medicine, as well as SIM cards and airtime. What this reveals is that AQIM's ability to embed itself locally is not based only on its ability to use force, but also on the establishment of an order based on financial strength applied through a religious-ideological framework. Already in 1998, AQIM members (then known as GSCP) started to arrive in the Timbuktu region (ICG 2005), and they approached the local population as honest and pious traders, paying a good price for the goods they brought locally. In this way, they bought themselves goodwill, friendship and networks. They also married locally – not into powerful families, but poor local lineages, deliberately taking the side of the impoverished (Bøås and Torheim 2013). Thus, in many ways, AQIM was acting as an Islamic charity, with the exception that they carried arms and did not hesitate to use them if needed. Thus, in addition to the ability to use force and generate resources, an insurgency repertoire can also usefully include a well-branded image of religious credentials and simply being honest and pious.

What this leaves us with is a new wave of insurgencies that are both deeply local and anchored in global discourses at the same time. Branding has become an integral part of their strategy. They are religious fundamentalists, but also pragmatic and extremely good at appropriating local grievances for their own purposes. As the case of AQIM indicates, most of them also operate in environments of little state control and state legitimacy where local livelihoods are under immense pressure due to a combination of increased climatic variability and the inability of the states to adequately react to this. As they are not seeking to capture the state or to break away from a state, but challenge the very notion of the modern state, there is no or only a very narrow margin for a negotiated settlement. Finally, as a majority of these insurgencies also seems to be very hard to beat militarily, the UN and the international community at large may be left to deal with conflict situations whose solution is very hard to find.

3. Some lines to conclude

The technologies of war, the modes of warfare and the language used to frame war is constantly evolving: however, this is not in itself a conclusive proof that a substantially new phenomenon under the heading of 'new wars' has emerged. Insurgents have always adapted to changing circumstances, including new opportunities for funding their projects of violent resistance, and the very nature of the conflict seems to be, if not completely permanent, at least much more lasting over time. This is also why it is so important to point out that all the conflicts and conflict zones currently active have deep historical roots: more often than not, the underlying cleavages that fuels the conflict are dating far back in history beyond the colonial period.

Each and every one of them are an offspring of unique social trajectories. Africa insurgencies, though, have something in common: that is, they have always been both the creation of and a response to political realities and their institutional manifestations. The 'new wars' literature, with is focus on economic agendas, transnational crime and terrorism can be very useful in explaining how armed movements sustains themselves, but this does not tell us very much about why these conflicts started in the first place nor about the wider motivations of those involved and the violence used. To understand this, we also need to take into account political, cultural and historical factors. The past and the present are connected in wars where insurgents are involved as elsewhere, and the only way we can hope to understand this is to consider how current conflicts are an integral part of the total history of the area in question. Due to the continued privileged position of the state – in theory as well as practice – examining who controls it and for what purpose is one obvious place to start our investigations. However, we need to keep in mind that almost all conflicts are local in character, and that not only material aspects matter, but also questions concerning identity and belonging. This means that what we need is a flexible and broad-based definition of what constitutes the 'political': politics in Mali for example is both formal and informal, yet the most significant political spaces are the ones that exist in-between the formal and the informal.

Insurgent wars are often brutal, and the consequences in terms of human suffering can be immense. However, such conflicts and the actors involved do not constitute anything substantially new, nor are they incomprehensible. It is only our approaches that all too often make us avoid seeing the obvious: people take up arms because they are angry, scared, poor, or short of other livelihood opportunities.

Thus, even if the new wave of insurgencies does not fit well with the established categories of insurgencies (see Clapham 1998), this does not mean that

they cannot be studied in a comparative manner. Far from behaving like classical insurgencies such as the Ethiopian and Eritrean ones of the 1980s and 1990s, the current ones seem more to be manifestations of rage against the patrimonial machinery of dysfunctional state structures: largely youth rebellions organised in social movements with a cultic element (see also Bøås and Dunn 2007). However, through empirical grounded studies of insurgent practices we can still establish conceptual categories as those suggested in this introduction that may enable a framework for analysis of single-case studies as well as mid-range theorising based on focused and structured comparisons.

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