

INTRODUCTION

IN 2003, A NEW WORD entered Western parlance, drawn from colloquial Arabic—*janjaweed* (devil-horsemen). The term connoted a phenomenon that had suddenly caught the world's attention: nomadic tribal bands rampaging through Sudan's Darfur region, attacking villages and destroying the crops of the sedentary population. Notwithstanding protestations by the Sudanese defense minister that the *janjaweed* are nothing but "gangs of armed bandits" whom the government is unfortunately powerless to stop, a U.N. commission of inquiry documented the way these militias acted "under the authority, with the support, complicity or tolerance of the Sudanese State authorities, and who benefit from impunity for their actions."¹

Groups like these are becoming ever more common on the global stage. As Mary Kaldor observes, contemporary warfare tends to involve a host of "paramilitary units, local warlords, criminal gangs, police forces, mercenary groups, and also regular armies including break away units . . . operat[ing] through a mixture of confrontation and cooperation even when on opposing sides."² Concurrently, John Mueller and Martin Van Creveld each argue that conventional armies are being replaced by a sundry mix of thugs and mercenaries whose allegiances to the state and adherence to long-established norms of conduct are weak.³

Underlying this jeremiad is the fear that states, the entities that have been the authoritative arbiters of violence in and between societies for over three centuries, are similarly becoming obsolete.⁴ A 1999 U.N. report noted that violence is frequently perpetrated by such nonstate actors. The greatest dangers to human security—ethnic cleansing, civilian massacres, banditry, enslavement, and child

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soldiers—stem from the incapacity of states to secure and maintain order.⁵ Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. national security doctrine identified weak states as posing as grave a danger as strong ones.⁶ In 2010, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates reiterated that dealing with “fractured or failing states is, in many ways, the main security challenge of our time.”⁷ Of course, no state is without some illicit or criminal use of violence. Rebellions and insurgencies challenge many states. But the possibility that a state would encourage a vigilante group like the *janjaweed*, the Colombian *autodefensas*, or the Rwandan *interahamwe* to deploy violence on its behalf seems to indicate a novel and dramatic degradation of the most fundamental of state functions.⁸

This study contends that the devolution of state control over violence to nonstate actors, like many features of the so-called new wars, is hardly new and does not necessarily presage a descent into chaos.⁹ It follows Michael Mann in recognizing that “most historic states have not possessed a monopoly of organized military force and many have not even claimed it.”¹⁰ Indeed, key features of statehood—including the monopoly over force—are empirically variant, not ontologically given. In other words, we should not mistake the ideal type for a representation of actual states.¹¹ Rather than begin with a normative premise about the qualities of “weak” versus “strong” states, this study seeks to answer a series of empirical questions about military development and the ways states historically have come to organize institutions of coercion.¹² Why do some states enjoy centralized and bureaucratized control over violence in the form of conventional armed forces, whereas others rely on militia and paramilitary units whose allegiance extends not to the state but to individual leaders, tribes or ethnic factions, or local strongmen? Are states that collude with nonstate violence wielders necessarily doomed to fail, as many allege? If so, how do so many devolved states survive? Finally, what is the impact of militias on international and human security?

EXPLAINING MILITARY DEVELOPMENT IN THE THIRD WORLD

There is a long strand of inquiry into the origins of social order and the drivers of state formation.¹³ Max Weber couched his famous conceptualization of the state as the holder of a monopoly over the use of force within a wider attempt to explain Europe’s unique course from feudalism to modernity. Over the course of a millennium, Europe witnessed the gradual replacement of the feudal lords’ small, decentralized, locally raised militias with large, centrally controlled national armies.¹⁴ While emphasizing different combinations of

political, technological, social, and economic factors as the primary catalysts, historical sociologists tend to agree that European states that could not manage the transition to military centralization—such as the kingdom of Poland or the Italian city-states—suffered predation and dismemberment at the hands of their more powerful neighbors. As articulated by Charles Tilly and others, Europe’s hypercompetitive, neo-Darwinian environment led to an isomorphic process of military development and state formation. Political entities had to adopt the irresistible trappings of a bureaucratic state combined with a large, centralized military in order to survive.¹⁵

Despite the explanatory power of these mechanisms in accounting for the trajectory of European state formation, the same theories have not been applied with equal vigor to the developing world.¹⁶ Certainly violence has been no less intrinsic to the formation of late-developing states (LDSs) than it has been in Europe.¹⁷ But most scholars come to reiterate some variant of Miguel Centeno’s conclusion that if war made the state in Europe, then limited war in the developing world contributed to the emergence of limited states.¹⁸ Subordination to Western control, first as colonies and then as dependents within the international system, distorted the process of interstate competition in the Third World. Postcolonial elites eagerly appropriated the juridical and normative concepts of statehood, even as decolonization left states bereft of the coercive and infrastructural capacity needed to actually govern their own territory.¹⁹ After independence, the provision of superpower protection and international norms guaranteeing the sanctity of state boundaries combined with the weakness of any potential regional rival to diminish LDSs’ need to engage in more thorough forms of centralization over force of administration. LDSs avoided the difficulties of building up conventional armed forces akin to what was seen in Europe. Instead, they focused on challenges of internal security and domestic pacification. The isomorphism prevailing in the developing world is the opposite of what was witnessed in Europe: LDSs could deal with internal challenges in a manner similar to premodern European lords, building up local militias through a combination of coercion and enticements directed at local strongmen and other peripheral agents.²⁰ This technique of violence devolution represents a fundamental abandonment of the state’s monopoly over violence and a turn toward what Robert Holden calls a reliance on parainstitutional violence wielders.²¹

The problem with such a broad generalization, however, is that it fails to explain the differences in military development *within* the Third World.

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Not all LDSs have adopted violence devolution and or used state-sponsored militias to the same extent. Indeed, even a cursory glance reveals profound variation in the size of military forces, the degree of technological sophistication, and levels of centralization, as well as the intensity, frequency, and types of conflict seen by various states in different regions. The Middle East, for instance, has seen numerous international wars and much higher levels of military spending than any other developing region. The region's armies are highly mechanized, technologically advanced, and organized along a more or less centralized basis akin to the militaries of the West. Regional states use these armies to eliminate rivals to their presumptive monopoly over the use of force.²² By comparison, interstate relations in other developing regions have been generally peaceful, with national armies small and technologically unsophisticated. In response to ongoing internal crises, states have had frequent resort to the devolution of violence, recruiting parainstitutional forces instead of centralizing military control.

This study builds and tests a theory to account for variation in the use of state-sponsored militias versus conventional armed forces among LDSs. The theory follows Eliot Cohen in finding the roots of different modes of Third World military organization in the impact of threat, distant battles, and inherited models of military organizations.²³ It offers a more concrete, historical explanation of Third World military development by situating generic mechanisms of institutional change in specific contextual space.²⁴ As such, it makes two interrelated arguments about the conditions that generate and sustain state devolution of violence to nonstate actors. First, the origin of state devolution of violence depends on different legacies of decolonization, particularly whether decolonization occurred through violent revolution or through negotiation. If guerrillas were active around the time of decolonization, newborn states tended to appropriate the networks of local violence-wielders, converting them from anticolonial insurgents into pro-state militias. If, on the other hand, decolonization occurred through negotiation, new states inherited the bureaucratic military organizational format of the departing colonial powers. Second, the persistence of these differing forms of coercive institutions depends on the permissive conditions of the international environment. If states face strong external competitors and the threat of war, then they are forced to adopt (or retain) centralized military formats to defend against external predation. If, on the other hand, the environment is pacific, either because of ongoing intervention by great powers or the relative impotence of regional rivals, then these

states can persist in devolution. Forgoing military centralization, such states deal with internal threats by relying mainly on state-sponsored militias.

Shedding new light on the dynamics of military development also offers a new set of policy recommendations for dealing with frail states that seem unable or unwilling to assert control over violence within their territories. These unorthodox prescriptions stand in direct contradiction of the presumed “imperative” state building that has guided the international community in recent decades.²⁵ On one hand, both violence devolution and centralization are systemic outcomes that can scarcely be addressed by the international community through the provision of aid, advice, and troops. Only revisiting the international system’s fundamental components—the norms of international sovereignty and the structure of international hierarchy—can avert the proliferation of state-sponsored militias. On the other hand, while nonstate actors have been implicated in atrocities, in many circumstances they have also provided levels of stability and security superior to a failing state. Instead of privileging state over nonstate violence wielders, a better way to promote human and regional security is to bypass frail states and instead integrate realms of limited state control directly into the international system. In sum, the international community must learn to live with militias rather than trying in vain to displace them.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

This study applies the logic of historical institutionalism and comparative historical analysis to examine violence devolution and military centralization.²⁶ It employs large-scale macrohistorical comparisons to achieve what Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers call the parallel demonstration of the theory.²⁷ Chapter 1 begins by sketching the concepts of state-sponsored militias and violence devolution. It offers a concrete historical theory to explain how different military formats originated in periods of decolonization and how conditions of internal and external threat determine the persistence of these formats over time.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 provide empirical testing of these hypotheses using comparative case studies of Indonesia, Iraq, and Iran, respectively. Despite having similarly weak central state institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century, each of these countries followed different courses of military development. Following its revolution, Indonesia emerged heavily dependent on militias and has continued to rely on nonstate actors until today. While this form

of violence devolution has been effective at maintaining control across the far-flung archipelago, it has also proved to have significant liabilities in Indonesia's efforts to exert power abroad. Iraq, in contrast, was endowed with a centralized and conventional military force due to its position under the British mandate. The Iraqi state quickly deployed this military apparatus both to compete with other regional powers and to control its own population. Since the American invasion of 2003, however, Iraq has seen a reversion to negotiation with armed tribal, religious, and other militia factions to gain a modicum of internal security. Finally, Iran initially took a course of military centralization by importing Western military technologies roughly comparable to Iraq's path of military development. After the revolution of 1979, Khomeini and the regime of the Islamic Republic tried to replace the conventional army with part-time militia-based units. The persistence of significant foreign threat, however, has forced Iran to reconsider its commitment to violence devolution and find new ways to join a conventional military force with state-sponsored militias.

In technical terms, these empirical chapters aim to facilitate both latitudinal (between cases) and longitudinal (within cases) comparisons.²⁸ They are therefore written with an eye toward capturing ideographic details while linking to general explanations of how and why these countries took such different courses.²⁹ Secondary sources, newspaper accounts, and U.S. and British government archival material provide the bulk of the data. To avoid biases of interpretation, significant care is taken to triangulate from diverse sources and to highlight contention within the relevant historiographies.³⁰

Finally, Chapter 5 concludes by applying these insights to contemporary policy dilemmas stemming from frail and failing states. Demonstrating the impact of deep-seated historical processes on the formation of centralized or devolved forms of coercive institutions calls into question some of the most important assumptions about state formation in the Third World. The alternative to intervening to augment state power, seeking to establish a monopoly of violence where it never truly existed, is to embrace violence devolution and find ways to recruit nonstate actors in lieu of defunct or rapacious states.