Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace

How militias and
paramilitary groups shape
post-conflict transitions

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Executive Summary

Today's civil wars are becoming more frequent, more harmful to civilians and harder to resolve. Over the past decade, the rate of major civil wars has tripled, driven in part by the growing role of non-State actors, proliferating insurgencies and transnational extremist groups.[1] Modern conflicts also suffer from much higher rates of relapse than earlier eras: nearly 60 per cent of conflicts from the early part of this century's first decade have relapsed, while 90 per cent of today's conflicts take place in a country that has experienced war in the past three decades.[2] Why are sustainable peace outcomes proving more elusive?

One contributing factor to these trends may be the increasing use of pro-government militias (PGMs) in armed conflict. More than 80 per cent of conflicts over the past 30 years have involved government collaboration with PGMs, while the more recent rise in transnational violent extremist groups has prompted an even greater reliance on PGMs in places like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Nigeria.[3] Auxiliary forces have played crucial roles in helping governments win back territory, weaken rebel forces or consolidate battlefield strength. They are a quick and cheap means of mobilizing force and may offer unique local knowledge and intelligence, building greater traction among contested communities or constituencies.[4] In some situations, States may turn to PGMs to outsource the "dirty work" of war while maintaining plausible deniability for human rights violations.[5]

However, the use of PGMs carries significant risks in terms of post-conflict peace and stability. Research has shown that the use of PGMs as counter-insurgents can make conflicts last longer, with higher levels of violence and greater risks of relapse.[6] PGMs exploit conflict situations for their own economic and political gain and may become spoilers to any peace process that would curtail those benefits, especially where they are excluded in political talks and integration deals. More broadly, using PGMs may entrench certain forms of violence, corruption and impunity that can last beyond a peace deal, undermining longer-term peacebuilding efforts and contributing to a higher likelihood of relapse into violent conflict. Indeed, the strong links between militias and a range of regional powerbrokers often means that PGMs embroil countries in regional and even international competitions, with far greater risks to stability.

Based on in-depth field research in Nigeria, Somalia and Iraq, this report aims to understand the role of PGMs in conflict and post-conflict settings. Specifically, it investigates how PGMs might help or hurt prospects for sustainable peacebuilding.

It is guided by the following questions:

- How do PGMs play a role in resolving civil wars and what specific value do they provide to governments?

- What social, economic and political stakes do PGMs acquire during conflict and how can they be taken into account to avoid becoming spoilers to peace?

- How do States manage violence committed by PGMs, including accountability for serious human rights abuses?

- What challenges have manifested in terms of efforts to demobilize, integrate or otherwise disband PGMs in post-conflict settings?

- And what are the essential elements of a strategy for dealing with PGMs?

Ultimately, this report looks to provide concrete and actionable recommendations for policymakers and practitioners engaged in some of the most complex conflicts today.

This framework contains four sections: (1) a review of the main scholarship on PGMs, focusing on the ways in which using them undermines longer-term peace and stability; (2) a comparison across the three case studies, drawing lessons for more general applicability; (3) the essential elements of a comprehensive strategy for addressing PGMs in settings with violent extremism; and (4) conclusions and areas of future research.

Conflicts involving PGMs present policymakers and practitioners with a set of strategic and operational choices. While national Governments and international partners often have different and competing rationales for collaborating with militias, they broadly make the decision to do so for four reasons: as inexpensive force multipliers; due to their superior local knowledge; avenues for legitimacy or coercion that are otherwise unavailable in weak or contested States; and where they wish to maintain plausible deniability for human rights violations.

As the case studies in this report detail, reliance on PGMs can be a double-edged sword: in the short-term, they may meet immediate security demands, but over time they can present significant consequences to peace and stability in four areas: undermining the State capacity and authority; the risk to civilians and the rule of law, contributing to further instability; through illicit networks and agents of criminal enterprises; and the polarizing forces in local communities and regions of PGMs.

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While each country is unique — in both the nature of its conflict and the ways in which PGMs have been brought into play — they share common themes. A comparison across the three case studies reveals a number of important considerations for policymakers and practitioners in nine cross-cutting ways:

A. Increasing fragmentation, and lack of control;

B. Blurred lines of State and non-State;

C. The competition to govern;

D. Economic incentives;

E. Diversity and division in PGMs;

F. Human rights abuses and accountability;

G. Foreign support;

H. International recognition and funding cul-de-sacs;

I. Few good options for DDR.

PGMs cannot be considered flash-in-the-pan responses to insecurity; instead, they are an increasingly permanent feature of the landscapes of twenty-first century conflicts. Their utility allows them to become indispensable actors, tied to the main sources of power in the capital and the broader region. Resilient in the face of efforts at demobilization and integration, PGMs appear to be most comfortable in the penumbra of the State, drawing resources and cover from weak governments, while being subject to none of the usual constraints on their behaviour.

This raises questions and points of consideration for policymakers to consider in relation to PGMs:

- **Setting a clear goal related to PGMs:** What role will PGMs play in the post-conflict period? What incentives and points of leverage exist to shape PGM behaviour (including related to human rights)? What role might PGMs play in a peace process to ensure they do not become spoilers?

- **Know your enemy and your friend:** What are the main motivations for a PGM to align itself with the State? Are there competing interests or loyalties within a militia and how will they affect the group's readiness to follow demands from the State? What role do interreligious conflicts and other cleavages play in driving militia formation and operations? What ties do militias have to outside or foreign powerbrokers, and how will this drive their decision-making?

- **Condition recognition by the State:** Has the government put in place measures to withhold recognition of, funding or other support in the case of human rights violations for PGMs? Are these measures enforced? Do they include basic mechanisms that would allow independent monitoring and sanctioning of unwanted behaviour?

- **Integration as one of several options:** Integration — typically thought of as a process to incorporate soldiers into an army — should be thought of broadly, allowing for movement into State police forces, national intelligence or even non-security branches of the government. If integration is taken forward, how will it affect both the State security services and the rump PGM (given that wholesale integration of all forces seldom takes place)?

- **Bespoke DDR processes:** The cases in this report do not support a generalizable finding when it comes to DDR. Instead, they point more towards the need for highly tailored, context-specific processes for dealing with PGMs. Do DDR programme in relation to PGM members needs to be located within a broader strategy that includes some combination of human rights vetting, the reduction of predatory behaviour and intercommunal reconciliation?

- **Gain leverage through payroll:** One aim of paying PGMs is to limit the likelihood that they engage in predatory behaviour towards local communities. As with State recognition, can payments be viewed as a bargain between the State and the PGM, where resources are made conditional? And, if so, on exactly what conditions?

- **Human rights due diligence:** Human rights due diligence is of particular importance during the integration phase of a PGM, in which it becomes formally part of the State security services. But how can human rights vetting be considered across all relationships?

- **Accountability:** Rather than think in terms of counter-insurgency, can policymakers consider PGMs as part of an accountability process that will eventually build the basis for deeper reconciliation across polarized communities?

- **Regional engagement:** What is the role for multilateral institutions (such as the United Nations and the European Union) to push for a less fraught regional environment or attempt to gain greater oversight over the roles of militias in these settings?

- **Beyond counter-insurgency:** How would a comprehensive strategy for addressing the risks posed, by both insurgent forces and the militias that fight against them, combine possible inclusion in the peace process, conflict resolution and positive peace that builds long-term sustainable resolutions?

The case studies in this project have made a clear case for the need to grapple with the complexity of PGMs, to think of them as part of the socioeconomic fabric of a given setting, and to design interventions based on both the risks they pose as well as the value they bring. Two key areas warrant further consideration:

1. **Funding modalities:** Policymakers need to grip the funding modalities for PGMs. As of today, discussions among international donors and national governments are scattered and ad hoc; these discussions reluctantly search for ways to maintain the impact that militias offer without a broader strategic sense of how resources can help shape behaviour, reduce risks of violence and ultimately undermine violent extremism. Whether to funnel funds through government coffers to PGMs is one question; how to resource PGMs in a way that constrains their worst impulses and improves State–society relations is a much deeper one.

2. **Integration and Human Rights Due Diligence:** The choice to rely on a PGM carries a significant risk that a range of human rights violations will be dropped on or near a government's doorstep. Integration should be one tool among many in designing a comprehensive strategy for PGMs in a post-conflict setting. Any strategy for dealing with PGMs would need to account for and look to engage the many nerve centres involved in the work against violent extremist groups, from major-power counter-terrorism operations to highly localized intercommunal reconciliation.

In sum, and as the case studies in this report make clear, when trying to understand hybrid security actors, it is essential to consider how they interact with already hybrid States.