

WORD CHOICE

The way we talk about warzones determines what we can learn from them

Hilary Matfess | 7 hours ago



A view of Kobani in ISIL-occupied Syria. (AP Photo/Jake Simkin)

Earlier this week, Bloomberg News published a beautifully done info-graphic “[The Ungoverned World](#),” providing information on “places across the globe where warlords, separatists, drug cartels, or terror groups have seized territory within a sovereign nation, leaving the government with little or no power—and the people to fend for themselves.”

The rise of the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL) and Boko Haram in northern Nigeria have renewed policymakers’ interest in these so-called “ungoverned spaces.” Unfortunately, this very terminology undermines attempts to understand the phenomenon.

Describing a place as “ungoverned” or “ungovernable,” a frequent refrain during irregular or unconventional conflicts, suggests that the population exists in a Hobbesian sort of anarchy. This sort of understanding leads to the promotion of policies to “restore stability” and to “establish institutions” in afflicted areas. This ignores the extant order—however perverse it may be—that communities under rebel control are subjected to. These spaces are not ‘ungoverned,’ they are “alternatively governed.”

While this may seem to be a distinction without a difference, there are profound policy implications in recognizing the order that arises when a government is incapable of projecting power throughout its territory. The process of combating rebel groups, insurgencies, warlords, and criminals in these areas depends not upon providing any sense of order, but in displacing the order that benefits these groups and then positing a promising alternative order that incentivizes local “buy-in,” thereby generating support.

As Yvan Guichaoua, a leading scholar on global governance and civil conflict, has noted, this requires not merely extending the influence of the central government. In the case of Mali it would involve “relying on the very powerbrokers and representatives in Bamako who [bear a huge responsibility](#) in the country’s present crisis,” through their alienating and marginalizing policies, but also expanding the legitimacy of the government and repairing fractured relationships between local and central power brokers.

Understanding how and why a space is governed in a certain manner by rebels or cartels will shed light on how to best combat these groups. Ultimately, this will require developing an order in these areas that builds in accountability and rule of law— something that is lacking not only in alternatively governed, criminalized spaces, but increasingly in a number of countries in which the elites act with impunity.

Consider, for example, the dramatic events that took place in Mali in 2012. Following a military coup in the capital, Bamako, anchoring the country’s more prosperous south, a coalition of jihadists (including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al-Dine) and secular separatist groups (most notably the Tuareg-led Movement for the National Liberation of the Azawad, or MNLA) [declared the independence](#) of the northern two-thirds of the country. The coalition fell apart over disagreements about *how* to govern the space; while the Salafist jihadi groups wanted to implement strict Sharia law, the MNLA’s connections to regional smuggling groups and unorthodox Muslim practices caused them to bristle at such oppressive rule.

These fissures undoubtedly helped the French intervention, [Operation Barkhane](#), achieve its objectives in establishing an order alternative to that of the separatists. The military capabilities of the Tuareg-Salafist coalition were strengthened, however, by the marginalization of the northern population by politicians in Bamako. Alternative governance can be appealing in instances where the internationally recognized “legitimate” source of order seems

unconcerned with certain regions or populations, or has been rotted from chronic corruption.

Similarly, my discussions with traders in northern Nigeria revealed that in the early years of the Boko Haram insurgency, local businesses were expected to pay a tax to the group in exchange for their safety and to allow for the passage of goods. In a region widely considered to be [marginalized](#) by the federal government in Abuja, the services and protection provided by the group should not be underestimated. Further, it is worth noting that the insurgency, now [the most lethal and fastest growing](#) on the continent, has its roots in the debate over how to implement sharia law—which is, ultimately, a debate over governance and order.

ISIL, perhaps the most widely discussed actor in alternatively-governed spaces today, has organized and institutionalized antiquities smuggling in the territories it controls. According to the Syrian archaeologist Amr al-Azm, as ISIL spread, it organized the existing looting and smuggling networks.

He adds that until 2014, this process was relatively decentralized and featured a number of armed groups, government bodies, and individuals. Al-Azm states that “when [ISIL] comes in, they take the looting and [institutionalize it](#) so it becomes part of their administration, their revenue-raising enterprise. It becomes more intensified, escalated, and organized.”

As ISIL has gained strength, it has moved from levying a 20% tax on those involved with the looting, to contracting out excavation; until finally in autumn of last year, ISIL absorbed the trade into its operational profile when it began to “[hire \[its\] own archaeologists, digging teams and machinery](#),” according to a report in The Guardian.

This sort of pattern is also reflected in ISIL’s control over oilfields. Last year, The Guardian also reported that the militants controlled roughly half a dozen oilfields. After taking control, the insurgency “[then tapped into established trading networks across northern Iraq, where smuggling has been a fact of life for years](#).” The revenue gained helped ISIL pay its soldiers—fighters earn \$500 a month and military commanders are estimated to [earn \\$1,200](#). Even the existence of negotiated wages alludes to the order that these insurgencies can provide.

Clearly, for all of the random violence that these groups engage in, the territory they control is not an ungoverned space. Ignoring the sort of order these groups provide not only makes it difficult to mount an effective response, it also misses a valuable opportunity to peer into how the groups themselves operate. Jeremy Weinstein, a fellow at the Center for Global Development in the US, and Paul

Staniland, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, have both explored the internal characteristics of insurgencies and rebel groups and have emphasized the external factors that influence the characteristics of said outfits.

[Weinstein argues](#) that the material factors of the operating environment determine the levels of violence perpetrated against civilians—essentially claiming that the means by which an insurgency finances itself influences the sort of order that it will inflict upon a local population. Staniland complements this argument by suggesting that the social context in which a rebellion emerges strongly influences the characteristics of the insurgency.

In *Networks of Rebellion*, Staniland notes that “during war, insurgent groups are embedded in social ties that determine they how they organize, fight, and negotiate; as these ties shift, organizational structure changes as well.” Thus, by looking into the sort of alternative governance that a group engages in, we may be able to better understand the material resources, social context, and potential vulnerabilities of these organizations.

If we are to restore the rule of law in conflict-affected areas and undermine the power of rebel groups, terrorists, and warlords, we must consider the sort of order that they provide the areas they control. This does not mean ignoring the savage means by which this order is installed and upheld, but rather recognizing that brutality is not anarchy. Only in doing so can we hope to articulate an alternative order that can attract civilian support.

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