Members of the pro-government Kamajor militia who aided the Sierra Leone government in fighting the Revolutionary United Front rebels, January 1999. © Jean-Philippe Ksiazek/AFP/Getty Images

Force Multiplier
PRO-GOVERNMENT ARMED GROUPS

<div style="text-align:right">10</div>

INTRODUCTION

Numerous non-state armed groups exist across the globe. There is no exact figure. Depending on how one defines a non-state armed group, the numbers could reach into the thousands.[1] They are not a new phenomenon; they have engaged in warfare and formed an important part of state political and military strategy for centuries.

One tends to think of non-state armed groups as those that act in opposition to the government. Groups engaged in civil wars—insurgents, freedom fighters, terrorists, rebels—are the stereotypical non-state armed groups, yet several more fall under the same heading. These include gangs in Los Angeles, *maras* in El Salvador, and skinheads in Germany, the Russian Federation, and Ukraine. Civil defence forces and militias are common in Africa and Asia. Clans, tribes, youth movements, and political parties have been involved in armed clashes in numerous countries.

Less frequently considered when thinking about non-state armed groups are those with links to the government—whether these ties are visible or covert—and that operate in support of government strategies. This chapter focuses on precisely this type of group, called here 'pro-government non-state armed group' (PGAG). These groups run the gamut from youth movements to street gangs, political thugs to militias, and community defence organizations to paramilitaries.

The term 'pro-government' can be misleading in some instances. While many groups included under this label do in fact assist in defending government policies, property, and personnel, this support can vary widely across groups. Some may be considered allied to the government simply because they do not actively oppose it. Others may choose to align with the government, and even fight alongside state forces, to defeat a common enemy or achieve a common goal. Some may indeed exist for the sole purpose of protecting a sitting government and defending it against any domestic threats. However, while the actions of these groups often benefit the state or a political patron, many PGAGs are not merely tools to be used by politicians, elites, or military commanders.

This chapter looks at the myriad motivations that lie behind the creation, co-optation, and use of PGAGs for achieving political, economic, and security goals. Examples of pro-government non-state armed groups abound. Political candidates in Nigeria have used local armed groups, referred to locally as 'political thugs', to garner electoral support and to deter, often violently, supporters of opposition candidates. In the Philippines, governors use civilian volunteer organizations as their personal well-armed militias. In the Balkans in the 1990s, the Serbian government supported Croatian Serb voluntary groups to ethnically cleanse the Krajina region of Croatia. In Afghanistan, the government has allied with tribal militias in an effort to defeat the Taliban. The list goes on.

Over the past two decades PGAGs have played an increasingly important role in security agendas, political campaigns, and wars. Despite their widespread use and devastating impacts on local populations, they remain an understudied phenomenon. The chapter underscores the need for more attention to be paid to how and why these groups are used and the political and security implications of their use.

The main conclusions from this chapter include the following:

- PGAGs are primarily used within the borders of a country, rather than across borders, and play an important role in the internal politics of a country and the perpetration of violence again civilians.
- PGAGs pose a serious risk to civilians—one that is potentially far greater than that posed by national security forces. This is particularly true when governments outsource the worst violence to PGAGs and allow them to operate with impunity.
- PGAGs provide an important source of security to some communities, thereby underscoring their positive utility and community support, and highlighting the difficulty of labelling groups 'good' or 'bad'.
- For many governments, PGAGs serve as useful and malleable tools to achieve their objectives in a way that absolves them of responsibility for the perpetration of abuses.
- PGAGs pose significant risks to communities and governments alike when governments fail to establish or maintain control over these groups or when the groups develop new agendas.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section introduces a spectrum of armed groups. The second focuses the discussion on non-state pro-government armed groups. The third section examines the various roles that PGAGs play. The fourth section investigates the impacts, both positive and negative, on the civilian population. The fifth section looks at what happens to PGAGs when they are no longer needed by the government or when they outgrow their government-held reins.

A SPECTRUM OF NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

Non-state armed groups come in many shapes and sizes. They vary in their purpose, composition, membership, organization, longevity, activities, and use of small arms. This makes it difficult to generalize about these groups or to provide a single definition that captures all of these important differences. There is no universal definition for 'non-state armed group'.[2]

A pro-government 'Jeune Patriote' militia supporter holds a placard at a demonstration in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 4 November 2004. © Emanuel Ekra/AP Photo

A very basic definition of an armed group is: an organized group with a clear structure, membership, and the capacity to use violence in the pursuit of its goals. Based on this definition, which includes a broad range of groups operating in varying contexts, Figure 10.1 suggests a spectrum of armed groups across a continuum.
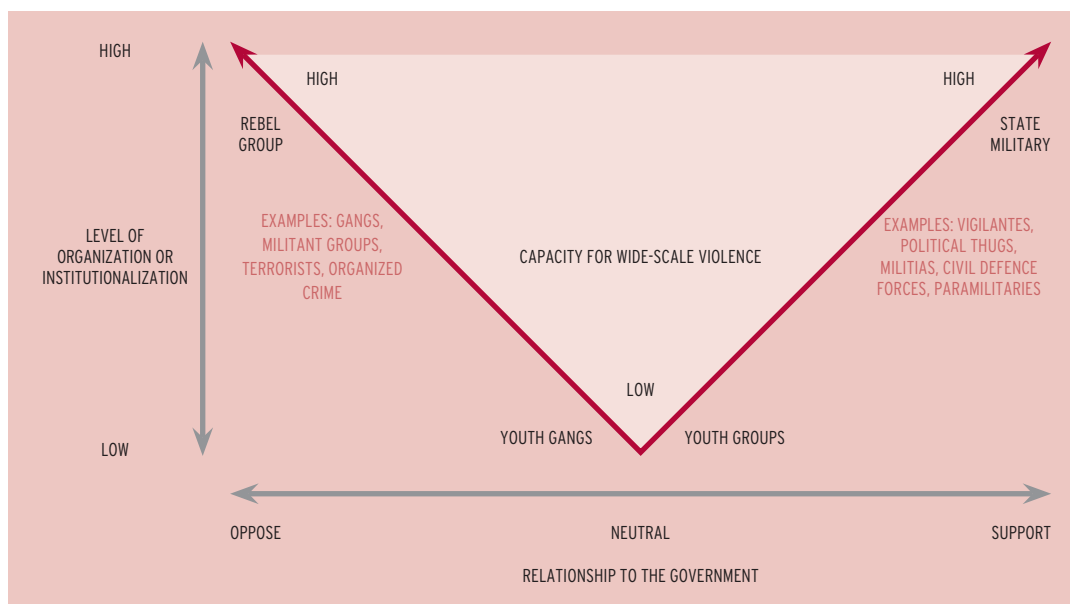
This is a simple portrayal of armed groups. A more complex depiction, one that would more accurately mirror reality, would include other factors such as the relationship of the armed group to communities and to the economy, as well as factors like strength, support, and size. Figure 10.1 suits the purposes of the discussion in this chapter; namely, to introduce a broad spectrum of armed groups from those opposed to the state and seeking to overthrow it (rebel groups) to those in clear support of the state and seeking to defend it (state military).

Discussions often split armed groups into two distinct types—those that support the government and those that rise up in opposition to it; the spectrum presented here challenges this simplistic division. While Figure 10.1 presents the two poles, it also incorporates a space for groups to be neutral towards the government. Most groups that fall within the neutral space are not trying to insert themselves into government affairs or change the government but instead aim to operate under the radar of law enforcement and keep the state out of their affairs (Davis, 2009, p. 232).

Neutral groups leaning towards the anti-government side of the spectrum include gangs and organized crime. While these groups do not necessarily threaten the government (that is, they have no desire to overthrow it), they do pose a challenge to law and order and can infiltrate the government and influence policy through corrupt government officials. Neutral groups leaning towards the pro-government side of the spectrum include vigilante groups and community defence groups. These groups are rarely managed or directed by the government, but instead operate to uphold law and order (as perceived by the group) and provide security to communities where state forces are unable, or unwilling, to deliver it. In so doing, these groups also present challenges to government efforts to ensure law and order.

Figure 10.1 represents a snapshot view of armed groups and their general tendencies. While particular groups may be placed on the diagram at a given point in time, it is important to remember that they rarely remain in the same position on the diagram over time. Groups may shift horizontally or vertically across the spectrum. These move-

Figure 10.1 **Spectrum of armed groups**

HIGH

HIGH

REBEL
GROUP

HIGH

STATE
MILITARY

LEVEL OF
ORGANIZATION OR
INSTITUTIONALIZATION

EXAMPLES: GANGS,
MILITANT GROUPS,
TERRORISTS, ORGANIZED
CRIME

CAPACITY FOR WIDE-SCALE VIOLENCE

EXAMPLES: VIGILANTES,
POLITICAL THUGS,
MILITIAS, CIVIL DEFENCE
FORCES, PARAMILITARIES

LOW

LOW

YOUTH GANGS

YOUTH GROUPS

LOW

OPPOSE

NEUTRAL

SUPPORT

RELATIONSHIP TO THE GOVERNMENT

Source: Hazen (2009a)

ments result from changes in government, in economic incentives, or in the group itself (such as in terms of capacity, resources, leadership, and goals).

Some of the labels noted in Figure 10.1—rebel group, gang, militia, and vigilante—are widely used in the media and have become a part of everyday language. Groups may be labelled differently by various actors or over time, leading to confusion about whether the group itself has changed or whether external parties have changed the label to influence public perceptions. Although common, the labelling of a group by a government is often a political act—intended to either demonize the group or justify the government's support of it. Once a group is assigned a particular label, 'a series of normative associations, motives, and characteristics are attached' to it (Bhatia, 2005, p. 8). Such labelling narrows the scope for understanding the group and justifies particular policy responses.

PRO-GOVERNMENT NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS

The rise of the state system and the growing control over the use of violence by states through the creation of standing armies led to a drop in the use of non-state violence by individuals and groups aiming to achieve their goals (Thomson, 1994, p. 3). Yet governments, both domestic and foreign, have continued to rely upon non-state armed groups as an integral part of their political, military, and counter-insurgency strategies (see Box 10.1). In the 21st century non-state armed groups are common (Shultz, Farah, and Lochard, 2004, p. 3; Williams, 2008, p. 5). Some states employ foreigners in their standing armies, other states hire mercenary organizations to fight their wars,[3] and still others use domestic groups as proxy fighters.

Box 10.1 Indonesian militias and gangs

Gangs, pocket armies, militias, and similar bands of men of violence figure prominently in the landscape of many post-colonial states. Such groups are rarely apolitical. The political potential of such groups depends upon the ability of the political benefactor to hide behind their actions, leaving these groups as appearing to act on their own and beyond official control. Correspondingly, much of the power of many non-state armed groups lies somewhere in their connections to elements of the state.

Since the downfall of the Suharto regime in 1998, Indonesia has been beleaguered by a host of non-state armed groups, including religious and ethnically based militias, armed secessionist movements, and paramilitary party youth wings. In the first few years of the post-Suharto period, observers worried that Indonesia might be on the verge of collapse (Schuman, 2002; Wanandi, 2002).

While a group may foster the impression that it arose newly and spontaneously to advance a particular interest or cause, connections to established political and military elites are often buried in these motives. There are allegations that the Special Forces units, under the influence of Suharto's son-in-law, General Prabowo, organized the riots, arson, and rapes of May 1998 in a failed bid for power (Sihaloho and Tejo, 2009). The religious conflict in the Moluccas most probably was instigated and stoked by agents provocateurs from Jakarta-based ethnic gangs with ties to ranking military officers, in part to play out intra-force rivalries and in part to demonstrate the continued necessity of the armed forces overall as the guarantor of domestic security (TAPOL, 2003). The pro-Indonesian militias in East Timor were meant to demonstrate spontaneous and deeply felt allegiances to Indonesia among the East Timorese, but few doubt that they were organized and directed by the armed forces command (Perlez, 2003).

Gangsters themselves have found it equally advantageous to nurture relations with those in power, and have commonly sought to win political recognition. During the mass purges of the left in 1965–66, some youth wings were enthusiastically 'called into service' and took part in the executions of hundreds of thousands of alleged communists. The military was thus able to disavow direct responsibility for the massacres and claim they were the spontaneous actions of elements of society. These groups were subsequently rewarded for their service by being institutionalized into paramilitary youth groups during the course of the Suharto regime, and by being given carte blanche to control a variety of illegal and semi-legal markets such as debt collection, security services, drug distribution, and prostitution (Ryter, 2002). The government has not been selective about which men of violence to cultivate; ideology has never been a significant consideration.

Dramatic examples such as these are hardly unique to the post-Suharto period. Rather, links between official forces and non-state armed groups and gangs date back to the origins of the Indonesian state itself and have taken on a variety of forms since. These groups are of most utility when their political connections are not manifest, and when their actions are viewed as responding to popular concerns. At the same time, they are most powerful when their political connections are merely rumoured and yet not conclusively demonstrable. This power, in turn, further enhances their utility.

Source: Ryter (2009)

Some observers regard the use of non-state armed groups to perform internal security tasks as 'outsourcing' security and military matters that should be the sole purview of the state. Their use is seen as a challenge to conventional assumptions about state sovereignty (Holmqvist, 2005b, p. 45; Williams, 2008, p. 5). This view is based primarily on an understanding of states as defined by their ability to maintain a monopoly on the use of force (Thomson, 1994, p. 7). Yet the use of non-state armed groups by governments could be viewed instead as an effort to expand the state's capacity, legitimately or not, to conduct a particular war or implement a policy. In this sense, it can be argued that states are not giving up their right to a monopoly on the use of force, but rather have temporarily delegated the right to use violence to designated groups that they hope to control. In practice, such control is often difficult to establish and maintain, a reality that often confronts a government after the fact.

This chapter is based on a review of numerous reports on a wide number of pro-government non-state armed groups. The analysis presented here is an effort to start to develop a better understanding of these groups, their relationship to government, the roles they play, and the impact their actions have on communities and civilians. As such, this chapter seeks to identify a number of patterns that can be found across PGAGs and, in this way, begin to build a foundation for future research.

The term *pro-government* is used to indicate that the group has some form of affiliation with the government (see Box 10.2). This relationship can be described in three main ways: creation, co-optation, and alliance. The government might create the group. This would involve recruitment, arming, and (in some cases) training a group of individuals. The government might co-opt an existing group, for example a hunting society, a tribal clan, or a youth gang, and then use it for a particular security task. Or it might choose to recruit existing armed groups, for example a civil defence force or militia, to fight alongside existing state forces.

A fourth relationship is more indirect and involves the government allowing non-state groups to act on their own. This raises an important distinction between privatized state violence (committed by the state) and privately organized violence (committed by private organizations) (Roessler, 2005, p. 209). In the case of the former, the government 'supports [. . .], sponsors [. . .], or permits [. . .] the repressive activities' of non-state armed groups for political gain (p. 209). In the case of the latter, violence is perpetrated by private organizations (such as self-defence units),

Armed groups that are allied with the government, but are not part of the regular armed forces, are surprisingly common. Pro-government non-state armed groups are a worldwide phenomenon. Numerous governments—including the United States—have engaged them for their own ends. The Israeli government used Lebanese forces (Christian Phalange) in Lebanon, the United States use Sunni militias in Iraq, and numerous warlords in Afghanistan collaborate with the ruling regime. Much media attention has focused on Arab militias operating in Darfur, often labeled 'janjaweed', which the Sudanese government mobilized for its own purposes, partly due to the weakness of the regular Sudanese army.

A new database at the Universities of Nottingham and Aberdeen has identified more than 350 pro-government non-state armed groups that operated in 190 countries during the period 1981–2007.[4] Each group in the database:

- is identified as pro-government or sponsored by the government;
- is identified as not being part of the regular security forces;
- is armed; and
- has some level of organization (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe, 2009, p. 2).

Such groups can be further divided into two main categories: those that are institutionalized by the state but are separate from the national security forces, and those that are not part of the official government apparatus but are supported by the state in some fashion.[5]

The database highlights the sheer frequency of these groups and their wide geographical distribution, raising questions about why governments, with regular state forces at their disposal, would delegate security tasks to these more informal groups.[6] The reasons are numerous. They offer governments a way to increase force strength quickly and buy off enemies while addressing the information problems states face in suppressing insurgencies in unfamiliar geographical and cultural terrain. Under some circumstances these groups may offer governments an opportunity to avoid direct accountability for violence.

The database also underscores that it is not just poor, weak, illiberal, or conflict-ridden states that make use of these groups. Various types of states, including democratic ones, have resorted to employing them. Yet choosing to use these groups involves risks. These include the potential inability to control the group, the various motivations of the group that may conflict with those of the government, a disposition towards violence, and the lack of training in 'combat morality' that could lead to the widespread perpetration of human rights abuses. The largest threat is that the group will develop an objective and support structure independent of the government and eventually turn against it.

Source: Carey and Mitchell (2009)

which operate of their own volition and outside of government control. In this chapter, private organizations are considered under the label pro-government if they operate without government interference or government efforts to outlaw, disband, or otherwise indicate opposition to the group.

Relationship to the government

Governments use PGAGs for a variety of reasons. They offer a number of economic benefits. They are often cheaper to maintain because they do not receive the same kind of support as national troops. They receive minimal training, if any. Their supervision is often left to community or group leaders. Although paid a salary, the rate is often below normal military pay. These groups are intended to be a short-term security force, and therefore the investment is minimal and for a limited duration.

PGAGs offer strategic benefits. They often possess excellent local knowledge because they operate in their own communities. This includes being able to identify strangers, tap into local networks, and operate with an understanding of the local geography, language, and culture. The group may possess a chain of command that makes it easy to deploy. PGAGs often possess a stronger commitment to defend their areas than non-indigenous forces and are therefore less likely to abandon their villages. They can act as a force multiplier for state forces in situations where the national army is insufficient in size to address the threat.

Governments can also benefit from the unofficial status of many PGAGs. Although governments have taken measures to institutionalize or legalize some groups, as with the paramilitaries in Colombia in the 1960s and the Village Guards in Turkey in the 1980s (see Box 10.3), overt links between governments and the groups are not always apparent. Governments may prefer to maintain a distance from the group and its actions as a means of avoiding accountability and denying responsibility. This is especially apparent in cases where groups commit widespread human rights abuses, including executions, disappearances, and torture, as in the case of the Ikhwan-ul Muslimoon (Muslim Brotherhood), a renegade force active in Jammu and Kashmir that has received Indian

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Box 10.3 Turkish Village Guards

The Turkish government created the Village Guards in 1985 to fight the anti-government force, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), in the south-east of the country. Village Guards had been used before. A 1924 law provides for the temporary creation of village guards in order to defend communities against looters and bandits. The government amended the law in 1985 not only to revive the Village Guards as an institution but also to establish them as public civil servants who were paid by the government and placed under the command of the civilian leadership.

The Village Guards proved an effective force against the PKK. From 1985 until 1992 the government recruited volunteers through negotiations with local chieftains. Following 1992, after losses incurred by the Turkish government in PKK areas, it proved more difficult to obtain volunteers. The government shifted to forced recruitment of civilians. Ostensibly, civilians were given the choice to join, but those who refused were often labelled PKK supporters and killed. This led to an exodus from villages to avoid forced recruitment. The government often destroyed deserted villages to prevent the return of so-called disloyal civilians and to deny the PKK access to these villages.

Although initially supported by communities, the forced recruitment practices of the government combined with the often brutal tactics of the Village Guards reduced popular support for these groups. The international community and the Turkish political opposition have pushed for the abolition of the Village Guards. The Turkish government has resisted the pressure to disband what it sees as a useful tool against the PKK. However, a massacre of 44 people in Mardin province in early May 2009 prompted the government to announce that it would consider measures to reform the Village Guards, though it did not express support for their dissolution (BBC News, 2009).

Source: Tsvetkova (2009a)

government support (ICG, 2004, p. 5).[7] The lack of a clear connection between the government and the unofficial group provides more leeway for how the government can use these groups and how these can act, facilitating the use of violence with impunity.

The relationship between a government and a PGAG indicates the extent of control over the armed group, the level of support the group receives from the government, the types of activities in which the group engages, and the extent of loyalty to the government.

A government that has created a PGAG will expect the group to exhibit greater loyalty and commitment to its objectives. These PGAGs are likely to receive higher levels of support (such as pay, arms, and protection from the law). However, they also require larger inputs of resources because of the need to create some control structures, provide training (even if minimal), and equip members. A government that forms and structures a PGAG for a specific purpose and acts as its primary benefactor will expect to be able to control the group more effectively.

Co-optation of existing non-state armed groups is likely to be both logistically easier and less costly for a government than creating an armed group. Using existing groups also offers the luxury of tasking a group that already has cohesion, organization, and a command structure. Co-opted PGAGs are likely to receive more moderate levels of government support. In part this is the result of their existing capacity, but the government might also exercise restraint in providing resources either to prevent the group from growing too strong, or to avoid links to the group that would incur responsibility. While potentially less costly, these groups are not necessarily dedicated to keeping the ruling government in power, and their loyalty might depend on the ongoing provision of incentives. These groups might also be more focused on securing their communities and defeating a common enemy than on protecting a particular governing administration. Thus they may prove more difficult to control.

Where the government simply opts to ally itself with an existing armed group, it does not try to establish control over the group, as it would through co-optation, but instead coordinates activities between the group and state security forces, for example during offensives on the battlefield. This option may provide the least control over the group, but it allows the government to quickly put to use an organized armed force that probably already has some battle experience. A more extreme version of an alliance is the tasking of non-state armed groups for specific purposes, such as ethnic cleansing of lands. In such cases, the groups are often left to their own devices to determine how best to carry out these tasks.

While the focus of this chapter is on the use of domestic non-state armed groups by governments, in some instances an external party may capitalize on the existence of indigenous groups to conduct security operations in a foreign country. A good example of this is the United States' use of tribal militias in Afghanistan to fight against the Taliban. Tribal militias have been used, by all sides, throughout the past three decades of war in Afghanistan. However, the new US strategy appears to try to address past mistakes that resulted in the creation of warlords and anti-government groups. The plan, the Community Defense Initiative, aims to provide checks on the militias by restricting the scope of their activities, tying the groups directly to the central government, and not providing the groups with weapons (although they already possess guns) (Filkins, 2009).

> **Pro-government armed groups appear to play at least three key roles.**

A RANGE OF ROLES

One way of categorizing PGAGs is according to their activities. Pro-government armed groups appear to play at least three key roles in support of a given government. They help the government to wage wars when state armed

forces are over-stretched, insufficient, or incapable of fulfilling this role. They aid in the achievement of political goals—most often election victories but also activities such as forcing minority groups off land. They may also provide security to communities in situations of lawlessness, ineffective policing, or communal violence. The same group can play different roles over time.

Waging war

Governments use PGAGs in a number of ways when waging war. They can be used as a force multiplier, quickly and cheaply adding numbers to existing government forces. They can be used in areas that are difficult to access, or that are far from the main front-lines where government forces are engaged. PGAGs can provide security to remote villages and less strategic areas. They can also serve as a deterrent to offensives by the opposition or they can hold areas recaptured by government forces. Governments may use PGAGs to collect intelligence in communities, where they serve as the eyes and ears of the government in identifying threats.

Unable to respond to the growing insurgency in Darfur with national troops, the Sudanese government developed a strategy to use, and in some cases arm, pre-existing tribal militias. This allowed the government to supplement its own forces, which were largely focused on the conflict between Northern and Southern Sudan. These militias offered a number of advantages: they knew the terrain, some already carried arms, and they allowed the government to depict the conflict as tribal, in an effort to avoid responsibility for the actions of the militias. Despite egregious human rights abuses and international demands to disarm the militias, the Sudanese government has made no effort to disarm or control them. Instead, the tribal militias have used their position and power 'to obtain salaries, war booty, land, and revenge' (Flint, 2009, p. 15).

Political goals

In addition to addressing security threats, PGAGs have assisted governments in achieving political goals. Such goals range from winning elections and suppressing dissent to promoting ethnic divides and maintaining politicians' positions of power. In some cases it is the state apparatus that creates and controls these groups. In other instances they fall under the direction of individual politicians or community leaders.

Governments have used PGAGs to control their populations. This includes policing roles, in some cases enforcing adherence to Islamic law, and in general suppressing any form of public dissent (see Box 10.4). They provide a deterrent to opposition, demonstrate the willingness of the state to use force, and serve to coerce citizens into following regime rules and policies.

Governments have deployed PGAGs to change the demographic composition of the population. In particular, armed groups have been used by governments to displace populations they perceive as 'problematic'. In East Timor, pro-government militias used violence and intimidation to instigate mass displacement of the population in the lead-up to the 1999 referendum in an effort to prevent a pro-independence outcome (AI, 1999; HRW, 1999b; Koefner, 2000). Despite widespread violence, these efforts failed to deter the population from voting in favour of independence. In Croatia, in the early 1990s, Belgrade supported and armed Croatian Serbs ostensibly to defend the Serb population in the Krajina region of Croatia (Doder, 1991). Belgrade sought to maintain this region as part of a greater Yugoslavia, rather than cede it to Croatia, which had declared independence in 1991. By committing violence against Croats and moderate Serbs, the Serbian armed groups served a singular purpose—to terrorize unwanted populations into leaving their land (Weitz, 2003, pp. 211–12).

Governments use PGAGs in a number of ways when waging war.

Box 10.4 Basij militias in Iran

In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini created the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a force to secure the revolutionary regime following the Islamic Revolution.[8] One group under the IRGC umbrella is the Basij militia (Mobilization Resistance Force). The main purpose of the Basij is to suppress those who might threaten the stability of the regime.

The IRGC tightly controls the activities of the Basij. Since its creation, the Basij has grown into the largest security network in Iran. Some estimates place its membership in the millions. Not all members included in such high figures are considered 'active'; instead, they are seen as reserve forces that could be called in to defend the country if needed. Members of the Basij receive various benefits, including preferential treatment in entrance to universities and applications for licences and business loans, exemption from military service, and small stipends.

The Basij has often used violence and intimidation in carrying out its duties. For example, it has mobilized support during elections, suppressed anti-government protests, harassed opposition parties and members, and enforced adherence to Islamic law. All core members receive ideological indoctrination and are trained in how to use rifles and other weapons; some units receive military training to assist the IRGC.

In mid-2009 the Basij appeared in international news reports for their aggressive response to large-scale protests against the 12 June 2009 election. Patrolling the streets, and demonstrating a show of force that deterred many from participating in the anti-government protests, the Basij held back from openly attacking the crowds, and instead carried out night-time raids of university dorms, attacked isolated protesters, detained young men, and engaged in general intimidation of the crowds of protesters. Large protests in December 2009 provoked increasingly violent responses by government authorities and the Basij militia (Worth and Fathi, 2009).

Source: Tsvetkova (2009b)

Female members of the Iranian Basij militia hold their guns during a rally to support Iran's nuclear programme in Tehran, 26 November 2005. © Hasan Sarbakhshian/AP Photo

Masked Krajina Serb special unit soldiers set up anti-tank mines on a road overlooking the Krajina Serb stronghold of Knin, August 1995. © Sava Radovanovic/AP Photo

One of the most frequent uses of PGAGs is electoral violence, which remains extremely common across the globe despite the fact that most countries today are democracies (see Box 10.5). Many politicians and political parties use electoral violence to gain political power and to solidify the power of the regime. Elections in Africa since 2000 have been violent more often than not, with more than two dozen states holding elections during this period, and more than half of them involving serious violence (Simpson, 2009). Despite the democratic structure of most states in Africa, elections have not yet become political struggles for power, as is common in consolidated democracies. Instead, demonstrations of state power and outright violence continue to underscore the nascent nature of democracy on the continent. Electoral violence has involved bombings, burnings, attacks on opposition leaders and voters, inter- and intra-party clashes, extra-judicial killings, assassinations, shootings, and ethnic clashes.

Politicians have co-opted PGAGs to incite inter-group violence as a way of distracting popular attention from the deficits of government and to achieve certain political and economic goals. In Kenya, the government has exploited ethnic tensions and resource scarcity to foment ethnic conflict as a way of deflecting attention from regime instability (Kahl, 1998, p. 94). Violence has been a common feature of politics since the 1990s, as seen in numerous elections. High-ranking government officials provoked ethnic violence to keep President Daniel arap Moi in power (Kahl, 1998). Vigilante groups such as the Mungiki have played a primary role in violence amid widespread allegations of support by ruling party officials (Anderson, 2002). In the 2007 elections, politicians openly advocated violence in communities (Afrobarometer, 2008). Violence has continued in the deadly aftermath of the 2007 elections involving 'new and reactivated militias organised and/or paid by high-ranking politicians' (Sjögren and Karlsson, 2008).

Box 10.5 The rewards of political violence: remobilizing ex-combatants in post-war Sierra Leone

Well in advance of the 2007 elections all main political parties started mobilizing young, predominantly urban men to act as informal security forces. The two largest political parties, Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and All People's Congress (APC), started to approach high- and mid-level commanders with army, government militia, and rebel backgrounds in early 2006. These former commanders were able to mobilize ex-fighters through still-active chains of command. A majority of those mobilized were ex-combatants, but others joined for the economic opportunity, and a minority joined because of true support for a party.

The SLPP and APC formed informal task forces, with remobilization occurring along party and former fighting faction lines. The SLPP remobilized chiefly former urban militia members from the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council and the West Side Boys, the APC from the rebel group the Revolutionary United Front and the newly formed People's Movement for Democratic Change from the ranks of former rural Civil Defense Forces in the south. They organized in military fashion with commanders and squads and used their respective party headquarters as bases. In part they remained there to protect and react in case the other party task force attacked, but they also carried out raids in Freetown and across the countryside to show their muscle.

Although many ex-combatants state that politicians and other leaders deserted them, and that they do not trust politics—or 'poli-tricks', as it is often called on the street—they still joined when called upon by these leaders. The reasons are quite simple. Senior members of the task forces received large sums of money, with some of it trickling down the chain of command. Ordinary members received food, cigarette money, and at times drugs. For some, the party headquarters provided a roof overhead during the heavy seasonal rains. In addition to short-term gain, participation offered the prospect of future jobs, education, or access to diamond mining areas if the party won the elections. Some task force commanders who had been imprisoned at the end of the war were released prior to the election if they promised to work in the SLPP task force. Finally, participation in a social network and loyalty to senior members of these networks remains crucial for both survival and success.

Politicians remobilized ex-combatants and reactivated military networks in order to win elections. Elections have always been times of heightened violence in Sierra Leone. Politicians and combatants from all sides had been closely linked throughout the war—warfare was indeed politics by other means. From the political perspective, the priority this time around was to recruit the most effective violent actors to their side. The creation of task forces provided a means of using controlled violence for political gains. The violence of loyal ex-combatants proved useful in scaring off the enemy, demonstrating power to the public, and threatening people into voting for the party in question. Task forces toured the country prior to the election to aid local party members through threats of violence, or direct violence, aimed at 'winning' votes.

The SLPP lost the 2007 general elections and the majority of the SLPP task force members were never rewarded in any way. By contrast members of the APC task force received rewards following their electoral success. Some commanders collected bonuses in the form of cash and cars, and in some cases government jobs. A group of about 50 mainly former Revolutionary United Front soldiers, who had served as APC task force commanders, trained in Morocco and are currently working as the presidential guard. One of the task force commanders heads that outfit. People further down the ranks gained few direct benefits, but they received something for their efforts, though not as much as they had hoped for when they enlisted.

Sources: Utas (2009); Utas and Christensen (2008)

PGAGs have at times helped further the goals of specific politicians, as opposed to the ruling regime as a whole. In Nigeria, governors in Abia and Anambra states recruited popular community forces, including the Bakassi Boys, to serve as their own private militias. Political patronage of the various factions of the Bakassi Boys proved the key to swaying these groups to act on behalf of local politicians rather than the community members they had originally protected (Meagher, 2007, pp. 100–08). In Bolivia, President Hugo Chávez created a popular militia, the Bolivarian

Liberation Front, as his personal armed force responsible to him alone and standing outside of the institutional structures of the government or the military (Manwaring, 2009). In the Republic of the Congo in the 1990s, rival politicians created their own personal militias whose members served as bodyguards as well as combatants in efforts to secure political power (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999).

Community security

PGAGs have long provided a source of protection to communities in areas where the state cannot, or will not, provide security. The inability of the state to provide law and order may stem from a lack of resources to recruit, train, and deploy effective policing forces. It can also arise from the focus of state forces, and state resources, on responding to an insurgency, thereby leaving some communities unprotected. In situations of insecurity communities employ self-help strategies that often include the creation of armed community defence forces.

Governments tend to allow these groups to persist because they serve state interests and free the government to use its resources elsewhere. One example is the role of vigilante groups in Nigeria (Hazen, 2007, pp. 73–75). The vigilante groups have organized to conduct patrols, deter crime, and in some cases arrest suspected criminals. These groups often conduct their patrols armed with rifles or shotguns. Since individuals may not legally possess these weapons, however, they are held in a communal building that provides access and storage—as well as a measure of deniability for any single member of the community. The Nigerian government has long known of the operations of these groups and has done nothing to either terminate them or support them outright. Instead, the groups operate with the tacit approval of the government, and serve as a weak substitute for the national police force, which lacks the resources to effectively control many areas of the country (Hazen, 2007, pp. 105–06).

In other cases, the government co-opts or allies with community defence forces. This provides the groups with a stronger connection to the state, which helps them to organize, train, and arm themselves. In southern Thailand, the government has supported the operations of three types of local defence forces: the Or Sor (Volunteer Defence Corps), the Or Ror Bor (Village Protection Force), and the Chor Ror Bor (Village Defence Volunteers) (ICG, 2007). Members of these forces are often recruited locally and thus have a better knowledge of the area, the population, and the insurgency than does the military. These local forces receive varying levels of training, respond to different chains of command, and in practice are given a great deal of autonomy in their activities; in addition, they can act with relative impunity. They are provided individual salaries or monthly budgets as well as small arms (mainly rifles and shotguns, although some leaders receive M-16 assault rifles). Some observers argue they have overstepped their mandate by taking offensive action against suspected perpetrators, often in retaliation for bombings of state and Buddhist targets.

Some community protection groups are created by the government rather than being community-generated and co-opted. For example, the Uganda Peoples Defence Force (UPDF), the national military force, created the Arrow Boys and the Amuka militia specifically to assist in protecting communities from attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the main rebel group operating in Uganda since 1987. The Arrow Boys proved effective in providing important intelligence and operating under UPDF command.[9] The government provided training, arms, and funds to the Arrow Boys. Their knowledge of the terrain, local language skills, and support from the local population make them an effective, and therefore attractive, force multiplier for the government. The Amuka militia, by contrast, proved largely ineffective due to the lack of support and weaponry from the government.[10]

PGAGs have long provided a source of protection to communities in areas where the state cannot.

PROTECTOR OR PREDATOR? THE IMPACT ON CIVILIANS

PGAGs are often equated with predatory tactics and indiscriminate violence. Numerous examples of such groups abound; very few operate within the bounds of the law, or with respect for international humanitarian or human rights law. Their reputations for brutality are often well earned (Holmqvist, 2005b, p. 48). However, not all groups are 'bad'. Many have proven indispensable in protecting communities in situations where the government cannot, or will not, do so. Yet even those that protect can be dangerous and commit abuses. It is equally difficult to find groups that can be labelled 'good' by all communities.

Although PGAGs are often viewed as a threatening force, the relationship between the group and the community in which it operates is often more complex. PGAGs can act as predators and pose a clear and present danger to certain communities, while at the same time providing a source of protection to other communities. The level of threat to any individual or community often depends on the activities of the group and the reasons for its mobilization, such as the suppression of popular dissent, cleansing areas of particular groups, or defending neighbourhoods from attack. While indiscriminate attacks do occur, most violence committed by PGAGs appears to be purposeful rather than random. This section, drawing upon examples given elsewhere in the chapter, looks at why PGAGs raise concerns about violence and human rights, and why they are sometimes regarded as providers of security.

PGAGs are often able to operate with a great deal of impunity.

Less restrained? Why armed groups are problematic

PGAGs are invariably dangerous. They tend to be poorly trained in military matters and human rights and humanitarian law. They exhibit varying levels of discipline, from loosely organized and directed structures to hierarchical chains of command. They often possess and use small arms, ranging from shotguns and rifles to assault rifles. In some instances, governments have diverted funding and armaments away from national security forces to their pro-government groups either because the national military is inept or because it is untrustworthy.

Governments have often granted PGAGs free reign to accomplish their tasks, and in some instances have outsourced the worst violence to them. In recent years there has been a decline in one-sided violence—violence committed by the state against civilians; however, this relative decline is offset by the use of proxies by the government, such as PGAGs (Stepanova, 2008, p. 44). This suggests that the overall level of violence is not declining, but rather that it is being carried out by unofficial, government-supported groups.

Due to their lack of incorporation into government structures, PGAGs are often able to operate with a great deal of impunity. Observers argue that PGAGs thus tend to have a more harmful effect on the local population than do the national security forces, which are ostensibly governed by the rule of law and held accountable for their actions (Butler, Carey, and Mitchell, 2009). The level of accountability influences the decision to use force; the more accountable the government is, the more likely it is to exhibit restraint. Delegating the decision to use force to PGAGs carries the risk that competing goals may influence this choice and implies fewer constraints on the use of violence. Some groups do have codes of conduct that guide their behaviour and internal mechanisms for sanctioning insubordination (ENGAGEMENT). Yet groups do not always possess, or employ, effective sanctioning mechanisms. In fact, some groups have encouraged looting and other self-payment activities by their members when they lack sufficient resources to pay their fighters.

The presence and actions of PGAGs can have a range of negative effects. They are often associated with higher rates of human rights abuses than government forces (Alvarez, 2006; Butler, Carey, and Mitchell, 2009). They have

targeted civilians judged as disloyal. They have forced villagers to choose sides, which not only increases the risk to the village, but can also entail 'cleansing' villages that do not side with the government. The mere presence of armed groups has often escalated violence in communities, exacerbated tensions between ethnic groups, and contributed to higher levels of crime. PGAGs have resorted to vigilantism in order to resolve personal or inter-community problems. The arming of PGAGs increases the number of arms in circulation. The possession of arms also makes the group a target for anti-government forces because it signals their pro-government stance, and therefore their threat to the opposition forces. PGAGs also serve as a source of arms, either through capture by opposition forces or through sales by PGAG members. Finally, as explained below, there is a risk that pro-government armed groups will mutate into anti-government forces, criminal groups, or terrorist organizations.

More restrained? When PGAGs contribute to security

The flip side of the argument about PGAGs is that they can offer a better form of protection for communities. Since they are often locally recruited and operate in their home areas, they know the terrain, the language, and the population. Arguably this knowledge makes them more effective in carrying out their tasks than regular security forces, which might possess limited local knowledge and may not be welcomed by the local population. In particular, local knowledge provides the advantage of being able to identify strangers more easily—a crucial asset in guerrilla wars, in which combatants rarely wear uniforms or other outward indications of affiliation.

PGAGs may also be more committed to protecting certain geographic areas because it means protecting their families, their homes, and their communities. This can make them more dedicated to the task, and less likely to run in the face of danger, thus potentially reinforcing group cohesion. Given their ties to the local community, the groups are expected to behave in a fashion that maintains these links and to protect community members. This entails constraining violent behaviour and using it only against legitimate targets, meaning individuals or groups posing a threat to the community. Yet this determination of threat is often left to the group, and it is not always directed outwards. While PGAGs may offer protection to community members, it is often contingent on the support of the population. Those who are deemed unsupportive may find themselves being identified as the enemy and therefore considered a legitimate target by the PGAG.

PGAGs are most likely to serve as a source of protection when they operate in their home community. When a group moves (or is moved) to another area of operation, the ties that encourage proper behaviour may be lost. They are less likely to be able to identify strangers within an unfamiliar community or to distinguish friend from foe. A lack of shared communal norms, relationships, and community expectations reduce the constraints on violent behaviour. Shifting areas of operation also removes the original purpose of the group—that of defending the community—and can replace it with more offensive goals.

PGAGs are most likely to serve as a source of protection when they operate in their home community.

THE END GAME

An important aspect of understanding PGAGs is the identification of the relationship between the government and the group and how this relationship can, and often does, change over time. Change may come in many forms. The government can change, either making groups unnecessary, unwanted, or anti-government. The group can change sides, either shifting to become anti-government, or in some cases an anti-government group might become pro-

government, as happened with the one faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka. The direction of influence might change. Whereas PGAGs are normally under the direction of the government, even if only loosely, groups may influence government policy through their actions or their demands. Finally, groups may outgrow the reins of government and develop their own purpose and support structure.

An important question remains: what happens when the PGAG is no longer needed? A group may follow one of four common paths. First, the group may disband after the task is completed. Second, the government may integrate the PGAG into official forces, legitimizing and legalizing the continued presence and operations of the group. Third, the PGAG may mutate into another type of entity, such as an anti-government group or criminal organization. Or the group may convert itself into a political party. The path chosen often depends on the circumstances of the group, the balance of economic and political incentives, and the perception of threats.

In some instances, PGAGs disband once the job is finished. This does not always entail a complete dissolution of the group, but rather a return to more localized community affairs. The Civil Defence Forces in Sierra Leone is one example. The government of Sierra Leone had called upon the country's traditional hunting organizations to fight for the government during the civil war of 1991–2002. These various organizations fell under the umbrella name of the Civil Defence Forces. They fought as a state military during the war, receiving salaries and support from the government, and then disbanded during the post-conflict disarmament process. The hunting organizations still exist but have returned to their communities; in some cases, they could be mobilized should they be needed again.

PGAGs can undergo various mutations from their original form and purpose. PGAGs can undergo various mutations from their original form and purpose. In some cases, the groups have been absorbed by the state, a process through which the group is legitimized, formalized, and legalized. Examples include the absorption of the 'janjaweed' in Darfur into the Sudanese military and that of the Croatian Serb militias during the Balkan wars of the 1990s into the Serbian military.

Other groups have escaped the control of their political masters and become anti-government. A number of examples abound. In India, the government sponsored militias in Punjab to defeat the Khalistan separatist movement. These grew beyond the capacity of the government to control, however; consequently, the militias acted with impunity in crimes against the rich (ICG, 2004, p. 5). In Nigeria, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force served as a political force for politicians running for office in the Niger Delta area in the 2003 elections (Hazen, 2007, pp. 77–79). Provided with guns and tasked with intimidating the opposition, this group enhanced the prospects of political victory for the politicians. But when the politicians won and failed to deliver on their promises, the group turned against its patrons (Hazen, 2009b). In Guatemala in the 1980s and 1990s, the government used Voluntary Civilian Self-Defence Committees and Civilian Self-Defence Patrols to wage a successful counter-insurgency strategy, but it proved incapable of controlling the forces after the war (ICG, 2004, p. 4). In other cases, groups supported by governments for internal purposes have grown into terrorist organizations posing a much larger threat, as in the cases of Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia and the Turkish Hezbollah (ICG, 2004, p. 5).

Some PGAGs have turned to crime. In Algeria, many of the self-defence units (*groupes de légitime défense,* GLD) have undergone a shift of priorities and have transformed themselves into profit-driven militias that plunder and harm rather than protect the local population. The GLD militias were given considerable power and freedom to act. Armed and granted exclusive privileges to serve as enforcers of law and order, the militias undertook citizens' arrests and committed massacres on their own initiative without being prosecuted (Sidhoum and Algeria-Watch, 2003, pp. 10–11; Garçon, 1998; 2004). In the late 1990s, reports indicate, GLD units failed to respond to calls for help from local villagers and allowed numerous massacres to take place (Sidhoum and Algeria-Watch, 2003, p. 35). GLD members

were accused of excessive brutality in committing mass killings and murdering whole families of alleged government opposition supporters or even killing civilians to resolve personal feuds or seize their possessions. In numerous villages GLD units extorted money from the local population or stole cattle. Moreover, evidence suggests that GLD units often disguised themselves as members of the opposition or other armed groups to commit crimes and robberies, which they later blamed on the group they had been impersonating (p. 29).

In Colombia, government-supported paramilitaries, such as the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), served as one tool in the decades-long war against insurgents, in particular the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The government-led disarmament of these paramilitaries began in 2002, but it progressed in fits and starts; observers argue that the process did little to dismantle these organizations. Many of those involved in the paramilitaries have since created or joined criminal gangs as a result of the lack of resources for reintegration support and a lack of alternatives. These gangs reportedly have ties to the insurgency, narco-trafficking, and other criminal activities (Manwaring, 2009, p. 18). Evidence also suggests that some of these gangs maintain political ties to high-level politicians (p. 17) while others have turned against the government and attacked political parties and government officials opposed to the drug trade (Tsvetkova, 2009e).

An AUC paramilitary fighter kisses his gun before turning it in during a demobilization ceremony in Campos Dos, Colombia. © Zoe Selsky/AP Photo

PGAGs that start as community defence organizations, providing security to local communities, can grow into something stronger. In Pakistan, the government has supported the *lashkars,* a collective name for local tribal militias, formed in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas along the Pakistani–Afghan border to protect local villages from Taliban attacks.[11] *Lashkars* exist independently of the government and are generated by communities as temporary security structures. They operate where the police and military prove ineffective in responding to security threats. The role of *lashkars* in defending against Taliban attacks has won them some government support, though not always generous. Due to the inability of the government to control the *lashkars,* the military has been reluctant to supply them with weapons (Perlez and Shah, 2008). The *lashkars*' hostility towards the government for not fulfilling promises to provide military backup for newly established local units has fed these fears. Critics—both external and in the government—are concerned that when the Taliban threat is eliminated, the *lashkars* will possess enough military power to be able to refuse to disarm and instead initiate their own rebellion against the military (Amin-Khan, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Given their widespread use in many countries, as well as the risks they pose to civilians, greater efforts should be made to assess when and why PGAGs are used, how they operate, and their impact on civilian populations. These groups cannot simply be equated with legitimate state forces or dismissed as uncontrollable bandits. Nor can they be excused as a necessary evil because the state does not or cannot provide security in certain areas.

Investigations into PGAGs need to focus on both conflict and non-conflict countries. They are not a purely war-related phenomenon. PGAGs have operated in elections, governance, and security. In areas where the state is weak or absent, PGAGs have served as a substitute for both state administration (such as by providing basic services or arbitrating disputes) and state security forces (such as vigilantes doing the work of the police). While these groups can provide security in some instances, questions need to be posed as to why they are used in lieu of state security forces, and whether they are the best response to insecurity. In many cases they have proven to be poor solutions for achieving security.

The use of PGAGs as state proxies has significant political and security implications. Political actors tend to focus on the immediate benefits of co-opting or creating their own personal militias (such as political power or security gains), but fail to consider the long-term security threat such groups could pose (to politicians, regions, or the state itself). The use of violence as an instrument of politics carries great risk. Although many countries in which PGAGs operate are ostensibly democratic, employing violence to ensure electoral victory or popular acquiescence to government policies threatens the very principles of a democratic state. The use of such groups, often prone to human rights violations and other abuses, threatens the security of the population and the stability of the government. Groups created to assist and support a government often challenge it further down the road. Very few governments have demonstrated the willingness or capacity to control these groups effectively once they are set loose or to punish them when they cross the line. ☒

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC	All People's Congress (Sierra Leone)
GLD	Groupes de légitime défense (self-defence units, Algeria)

IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
PGAG	Pro-government non-state armed group
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party (Turkey)
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
UPDF	Uganda Peoples Defence Force

ENDNOTES

1   For examples of databases on conflicts and armed groups see: Afghanistan Conflict Monitor (n.d.); Armed Groups Project (n.d.); IISS (n.d.); RULAC (n.d.); SIPRI (n.d.); Small Arms Survey (n.d.); Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups (n.d.a).

2   See the following for definitions and classifications of various types of non-state armed group: Capie (2004); Florquin and Berman (2005); Policzer (2005); Shultz, Farah, and Lochard (2004); Vinci (2006); Williams (2008).

3   This chapter does not address the use of private military companies. For a discussion of private military companies see Holmqvist (2005a); Singer (2001).

4   The database can be found at PGAG (n.d.).

5   For a discussion of these sub-groups, see Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe (2009).

6   For a discussion of why states use these groups, see Mitchell (2004).

7   For more information on these human rights abuses, see HRW (1999a).

8   For more on the IRGC, see GlobalSecurity.org (n.d.).

9   This discussion of the Arrow Boys is based on Tsvetkova (2009c). For more details on the Arrow Boys, see Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups (n.d.b).

10   For more details on the Amuka militia, see Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups (n.d.c).

11   Discussion of *lashkars* based on Tsvetkova (2009d).

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