

# Force Multiplier

## PRO-GOVERNMENT ARMED GROUPS

Numerous non-state armed groups exist across the globe. There is no exact figure. The numbers are likely to reach into the thousands. 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.

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.

Less frequently considered are those with links to the government—whether these ties are visible or covert—and that operate in support of government strategies. These ‘pro-government non-state armed groups’ (PGAGs) run the gamut from youth movements to street gangs, political thugs to militias, and community defence organizations to paramilitaries.

**PGAGs can undergo various mutations from their original form and purpose.**

Over the past two decades PGAGs have played an increasingly important role in security agendas, political campaigns, and wars. Despite their widespread use and often devastating impacts on local populations, they remain an understudied phenomenon, with little attention 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 against civilians.



A pro-government ‘Jeune Patriote’ militia supporter holds a placard at a demonstration in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, 4 November 2004.  
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- 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.

This chapter is based on a review of numerous reports on a wide number of pro-government non-state armed groups. The analysis begins 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.

The term *pro-government* is used to indicate that the group has some form of affiliation with the government. This relationship can be described in three main ways: creation, co-optation, and alliance. Governments use PGAGs for a variety of reasons and for the various economic, strategic, and political benefits they offer.

Pro-government armed groups play at least three key roles in support of the government. They help 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 also provide security to communities in situations of lawlessness, ineffective policing, or communal violence.

PGAGs are often equated with predatory tactics and indiscriminate violence. 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. However, 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 difficult to label any PGAG as either 'good' or 'bad,' and such labels often depend on the position of the observer. 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.

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

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.

PGAGs cannot simply be equated with legitimate state forces, dismissed as uncontrollable bandits, or excused as a necessary evil because the state does not or cannot provide security in certain areas. 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, but fail to consider the long-term security threats such groups could pose. Groups created to assist and support a government often challenge it further down the road. ▀