



Canadian Press/AP photo. 1639692 by Karim Kadim

Radical Shiites protest Israeli attacks on Lebanon in Baghdad, 21 July 2006.

WHAT IS AN ANSA?

James W. Moore

Introduction

Insurgents. Terrorists. Warlords. Narco-traffickers. There are any number of irregular adversaries that populate the complex battlespace in which members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) may find themselves operating in future campaigns. And as our prefatory list suggests, there are a plethora of terms that are used to describe these non-conventional actors. Yet, paradoxically, this embarrassment of terminological riches may actually hinder rather than help our understanding of the operating environment of the future. Rather than a ‘grab bag’ of labels from which to pick and choose, what we need is a shared, comprehensive term that facilitates the generation and communication of knowledge related to the intentions, capabilities, and behaviours of the host of actual or potential irregular adversaries likely to be encountered in post-Afghanistan operations. In this article, we propose one such candidate: the Armed Non-state Actor, or ANSA.

We begin with a discussion of the shortcomings of the terms, such as those mentioned above, commonly used to describe these non-conventional actors. These terms tend to be emotive and evaluative, and often obscure as much as they illuminate. Moreover, they do not easily lend themselves to distinguishing groups that are hybrids of multiple types and are constantly changing over time. Hence, the need for a comprehensive, neutral term of description. In

the section that follows, we propose an alternative expression - the Armed Non-state Actor - and, in the absence of an authoritative definition, derive a working definition for the term:

- An autonomously operating planned group that has the capacity to use violence to achieve political ends.

We then contrast it with a competing phrase often encountered in the defence and security literature: the Violent Non-state Actor (VNSA), noting that ANSA is effectively a sub-category of VNSA. Finally, we conclude with some broader reflections on the need for - and the usefulness of - clear, shared terminology in advancing our understanding of these social actors.

Shortcomings in Common Terms

Why do we need to assign pride of place to an expression like ANSA? We already have a number of labels that

Dr. James W. Moore, Ph.D., LL.M., is a Defence Scientist in the Socio-Cognitive Systems Section at DRDC Toronto. Previously, he worked for twenty years as a Strategic Analyst responsible for research and reporting on the Middle East with the Directorate of Strategic Analysis/CORA at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa. He earned his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and holds an LL.M. in Public International Law from Osgoode Hall Law School, York University.¹



Two female FARC guerrillas from the *bloc móvil Arturo Ruiz*, inside one of the FARC camps.

are routinely attached to irregular civilian or paramilitary individuals and groups confronted in the battlespace. And, unlike ANSA (see the next section), many of these terms have precise military-purpose definitions. Turning to the CAF's central lexicographic repository, the Defence Terminology Bank (DTB), we find one commonly used term – 'insurgent' – defined as "an organized, often ideologically motivated, group or movement that seeks to effect or prevent political change or to overthrow a governing authority within a country or a region, focused on persuading or coercing the population through the use of violence and subversion." (This is a slightly reworked version of the DTB's definition of insurgency,² as the Bank does not include a definition for insurgent *per se*.) This distinguishes – at least in lexical terms – 'insurgent' from 'terrorist,' that is, "a supporter of a dissident faction who resorts to violence in order to intimidate and coerce people for political ends."³

Why transition from these more common labels to what some might argue is a more awkward and cumbersome expression like ANSA? In the first instance, these everyday labels carry with them far too much emotive baggage. Terms like 'freedom fighter,' for example, can inspire positive emotions of trust and admiration, while terms like 'terrorist' can stir negative emotions of fear and anger. Rather than these emotionally packed labels, what we need is a neutral term that identifies a slice of the actors in the social conflict space, but does not subconsciously incline us either for or against those actors through the terminology we use. By employing an impartial term like ANSA, we can hopefully avoid the biases inherent in these other, more loaded terms.

Closely related to this, these common labels are evaluative rather than analytical in that they express some degree of approval,

or, more often than not, disapproval of the group to which they are applied. They are used as weapons of political warfare that reflect more on the actors that employ them than on the groups they purport to describe. Not surprisingly, these politically charged terms may change as circumstances change. For example, in the early years of the US occupation of Iraq, the US military loosely grouped together all Sunni-sectarian factions - including secular/ideological, tribal, and religious/Islamist groups - under the rubric of "insurgents," "Anti-Iraq Forces" (AIF), or, in then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's graphic description, "dead-enders."⁴ However, US terminology for these ANSAs changed dramatically when many of them turned against al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2005/2006 and began fighting alongside US forces.⁵ Rather than insurgents, these former anti-coalition fighters were linguistically transformed into the "Sons of Iraq." To avoid the vagaries of such political language, we should avoid as much as possible the use of subjectively evaluative terms like insurgent and terrorist in favour of a more objectively analytical expression like ANSA.

Not only pregnant with prejudice, common labels such as these do not fully capture the complex nature of these groups of interest. Most, if not all, irregular adversaries represent hybrids of the amorphous, ill-defined types to which these labels refer. For example, a group may launch military strikes against state security forces at the same time as carrying out terrorist attacks against civilian targets, while relying upon the profits from parallel criminal activities (i.e., kidnapping, drug trafficking, armed robbery, and so on) to finance its campaign of violence. The Afghan Taliban is a case in point. The majority of its military operations are conventional attacks (i.e., small arms fire, RPG attacks, and so on) directed against the Afghan security forces and international military forces.⁶ The group also deliberately targets civilians,

Canadian Press/AP photo 5399060 (Anonymous)



A Taliban militant guards an opium poppy field in Naway District of Helmand Province in southwest Afghanistan, 25 April 2008.

in particular, those seen as supporting or collaborating with the Kabul regime and its coalition allies. In 2011, for example, IEDs, suicide bombings, and targeted killings took the lives of 2332 civilians, 77 percent of all civilian conflict-related deaths in that year.⁷ To fund its campaign, the Taliban increasingly draws on earnings from criminal activities. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that 70 percent of the Taliban's operational funding comes from the opium trade (i.e., taxing poppy farmers and guarding drug smugglers' shipments).⁸ The money - estimated at US\$500 million in 2007 alone⁹ - is pulling the group ever deeper into the drug trade. Former head of the counternarcotics task force at the American embassy in Kabul Doug Wankal described this process as the "FARCification of the Taliban,"¹⁰ in reference to the Colombian ANSA that over the years succumbed to the lure of profit in the cocaine trade. How should a group like the Taliban be classified? Is it an insurgent organization, a terrorist group, or a criminal gang? Or is it all three?

Moreover, these groups are dynamic social entities whose nature may change over the course of a conflict. A group may begin as an insurgent organization motivated to redress the perceived socio-economic and/or political grievance(s) of its parent group. However, as the conflict drags on, the initial motivation of grievance may fade as illicit economic opportunities for enrichment present themselves and greed becomes the dominant motivation for carrying on the fight. The group thus may metamorphose into a criminal organization, increasingly engaging in activities such as smuggling, extortion, blackmail, kidnapping, drug trafficking, illegal resource exploitation, and so on, while abandoning its original political *raison d'être*.

Illustrative of this dynamic is the apparent transformation of the Jaish al Mahdi (Mahdi Army - JAM), the Shiite militia of Iraqi cleric Moqtada al Sadr. Originally a nationalist militia that emerged in June 2003 in sometimes violent opposition to the US invasion and occupation

of Iraq, it came to be seen among many Iraqi Shiites as their sole defender during the months of intense sectarian violence that followed the bombing of the Al 'Askari Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. However, as the threat from Sunni insurgents ebbed and the sectarian conflict subsided, the militia lapsed into criminality. Young militia members - lacking direction and control from senior commanders swept up in American counter-insurgency dragnets - turned to dealing in protection, stolen cars, and property confiscated from dead or displaced Shiites as well as from Sunnis. Increasingly, many Shiites turned against them, criticizing the militia as "a band of street thugs without ideology."¹¹

JAM subsequently tried to move away from violence and criminality and to re-invent itself as a nonviolent social and cultural movement. In the summer of 2008, scant months after suffering a severe military setback in fighting in Basra and other areas of the south against Iraqi government and US forces, al Sadr ordered the militia's rank and file to lay down their weapons and join a new religious and cultural wing of the movement called the Momahidoun ("those who pave the way"). According to Sadrist leaders at the time, this organization planned to offer welfare services, literacy programs, and courses in general Islamic teaching and ethics - open to all Iraqis regardless of sect or political affiliation - to counter the "culture of killing" that they said al Qaeda had brought to Iraq.¹² The point to note here in this brief recounting of JAM's apparent transformation is that these actors are not static social entities to which one may affix timeless labels such as insurgent, guerilla, or terrorist. Indeed, they may not even remain *armed* non-state actors, depending upon how they adapt to changes in the social environment in which they operate and of which they are a product.

An Alternative: The Armed Non-state Actor (ANSA)

For these reasons, the terms we commonly use to identify non-conventional actors in the battlespace are not particularly



Members of al-Mahdi army march in Baghdad, 26 March 2005.

AP photo 050326014185 by Samir Mizban



Personnel Armoured Vehicles in front of Villa Somalia in Mogadishu, 27 July 2006. The Islamic militia that seized the capital was setting up a religious court inside the villa's vast compound.

helpful in advancing our understanding of these players. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive, analytically neutral alternative: the Armed Non-state Actor. But what exactly is an ANSA? When faced with questions of definition in *lingua militare*, recourse in the first instance should be made to the Defence Terminology Bank (DTB), the primary authoritative reference source of approved terminology in DND/CAF. A search of this repository, however, does not turn up a precise definition of the phrase. The DTB does define the more general term 'non-state actor' as "a person or organization not associated with an officially recognized government."¹³ 'Armed groups' (i.e., rebel opposition forces, militias, warlords, insurgents, and private military firms) are identified as one of nine types that make up the broader class of non-state actor, but this sub-category is not characterized further.

If we accept ANSA as a candidate for our alternative descriptor, how should we define it? In one respect, this is a unit of analysis question.¹⁴ When we speak of ANSAs, to whom or what are we referring: individuals or groups? Somewhat confusingly, ANSA has been used in the defence and security literature to refer to both individuals and groups. Thus, it is incumbent upon us to specify the unit of analysis, whether individual or group, to which we are referring when using the term. Bearing this in mind, the following section describes the derivation of a working definition for ANSA at the group level.

Our quest for a working definition starts from the premise that an ANSA is an agent, that is, a social actor with the capacity for purposeful or willed action. An agent may be either an individual

or a group, but, as mentioned above, the definition of ANSA will apply to groups only, while individuals will be referred to as members of ANSAs. A 'group' is defined in general as "...a number of individuals, defined by formal or informal criteria of membership, who share a feeling of unity or are bound together in relatively stable patterns of interaction."¹⁵ This shared "feeling of unity" or fraternity among members is a key feature of an ANSA. To adopt the term of political scientist Benedict Anderson in his seminal 1983 study on nationalism, an ANSA is an "imagined community" in the sense that "in the minds of each [member] lives the image of their communion."¹⁶ Although there is a "deep horizontal comradeship"¹⁷ among its members, an ANSA is rarely a monolithic or monocultural entity. Individuals, cliques, and factions may hold different interests, values, and beliefs that can come into conflict, and, if too divergent, they can paralyze group action and ultimately threaten group order and cohesion.

“Somewhat surprisingly, ANSA has been used in the defence and security literature to refer to both individuals and groups.”

Groups may be characterized as planned or emergent. A planned group is one deliberately formed by its members or an external authority.¹⁸ This includes traditional vertically-structured organizations in which the hierarchical relationships among the constituent elements are formally or institutionally ordered, as well as horizontal networks in which autonomous cells loosely synchronize their actions with other cells on a more or less *ad hoc* basis. An emergent group, on the other hand, is a collection of individuals who come together spontaneously to act without prior arrangement.¹⁹ In this respect, an ANSA is regarded as a planned as opposed to an emergent group. A rioting crowd is not an ANSA, although members of an ANSA may participate in, or, indeed, actively encourage the emergence of such a violent gathering.

Groups may be further distinguished as either state or non-state actors. In sociologist Max Weber's (1919/1946) classic formulation, the feature that sets the state apart among the panoply of human communities is that it "(successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* [original emphasis] within a given territory."²⁰ From time to time, the state may delegate the right to use force to other institutions or individuals, but it remains "the sole source" of this "right."²¹ Consistent with this conceptualization, 'state actor' refers to the group or groups that control the amalgam of power institutions - whether configured in a modern bureaucratic, feudal, tribal, or other structure - that people generally associate with the governance architecture within a particular territorial entity. A 'non-state actor,' conversely, is simply a group that does not direct or control those institutions (regardless of whether or not they do, in fact, want to control them).

Moving on to armed non-state actors specifically, many working definitions have been advanced for the term, a selection of which follows:

"Groups that are armed and use force to achieve their objectives and are not under state control."²²

"Armed groups that operate beyond state control."²³

"Any armed actor with a basic structure of command operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political or allegedly political objectives."²⁴

"Any identifiable group that uses armed methods, and is not within the formal structure of a recognized state."²⁵

Note that these definitions, drawn largely from the humanitarian and human rights community, are policy prescriptive rather than scientific definitions. They define the actors with whom, it is argued, humanitarian organizations must engage on a practical level in order to achieve specific policy goals, such as negotiated access in war zones to permit the supply of humanitarian aid.

The similarities in the above definitions are immediately apparent. More generally, definitions of ANSAs emphasize four characteristics:²⁶

A basic command structure.

An ANSA has a basic organizational coherence, with command structures ranging from loose decentralized structures (i.e., networks) to more rigid and centralized hierarchies. The key consideration here is the degree of control the command structure provides the leadership over the group, that is, whether it is sufficient to allow ANSA leaders to exercise a minimum level of restraint over the conduct of its fighters.



Canadian Press/AP photo 1806359 by Karim Kadim

Al-Mahdi army protesters in Sadr City, Baghdad, 21 July 2006.

However, al Qaeda's (The Base - AQ) move from "corporate terrorism" to "terror franchises," or the apparent shift of the global jihadist movement more broadly to what sociologist Marc Sagemann (2008) describes as "leaderless jihad,"²⁷ calls into question whether this remains a necessary characteristic.

The use of violence for political ends.

An ANSA uses violence as a means - although not necessarily the exclusive or primary means - to contest political power with governments, foreign powers, and/or other non-state actors.²⁸ The practical political agendas of ANSAs are as varied as the groups themselves. They may seek to protect or advance the interests of their clan, tribe, ethnic, or religious community within a national or transnational framework. They may seek to overthrow a government or occupation authority, or, more fundamentally, to foment revolutionary change of the national or international political system. They may seek to conquer and control a national territory, or to detach a component region there from. They may seek to preserve a status quo or return to a status quo ante that privileges their political, social, and/or economic position or that of the group they claim to represent. Regardless of the specific end state, it is the capacity - that is, the capability and intention - to use violence to achieve political ends that is the main quality distinguishing an ANSA from other violent and non-violent groups.

"Determining a group's capacity for political violence may not be as straightforward as it seems."

Determining a group's capacity for political violence may not be as straightforward as it seems. Consider, for example, the radical Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (The Party of Islamic Liberation - HT). HT is an international Islamic movement founded in 1953 by a Palestinian Islamic scholar and shariah appeal court judge Taqiuddin an-Nabhani. The group shares the same political goal as many violent jihadist groups: the reunification of the ummah in a single, authentic Muslim state - the Caliphate. With an international network extending through more than 40 countries, a membership conservatively estimated at over one million, and a cellular underground structure reminiscent of that of the Russian Bolsheviks²⁹, the group is thought to have the capability for violence. But does it likewise have the intent?

HT publicly rejects violence, and does not itself engage in terrorist attacks. However, Nixon Center Director for International Security and Energy Programs Zeyno Baran (2004), among others, sees its "rhetoric of democracy and...message of non-violence" as superficial.³⁰ She claims that the group has never condemned the violence of other jihadist groups, nor has it denounced terrorist attacks.³¹ On this point, at least, Baran is wrong. HT condemned Armed Islamic Group (GIA) atrocities during the Algerian civil war (1992-2002), the 9/11 attacks, and the 7/7 attacks in Britain,³² (though Baran cannot be faulted for not referring to the UK attacks since they came after the publication of her monograph). Be that as it may, she continues:



Members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla forces in Uribe, Colombia, 25 October 1999.

In many ways, HT is part of an elegant division of labor. The group itself is active in the ideological preparation of the Muslims, while other organizations handle the planning and execution of terrorist attacks. Despite its objections to this description, HT today serves as a de facto conveyor belt for terrorists.³³

The UK government, for its part, does not share this simplistic ‘conveyor belt’ view of HT. A “Restricted” document leaked to the *The Sunday Telegraph* in 2010 entitled “Government strategy towards extremism,” says:

It is sometimes argued that violent extremists have progressed to terrorism by way of a passing commitment to non-violent Islamist extremism, for example of a kind associated with al-Muhajiroun or Hizb ut Tahrir... We do not believe that it is accurate to regard radicalisation in this country as a linear ‘conveyor belt’ moving from grievance, through radicalisation, to violence ... This thesis seems to both misread the radicalisation process and to give undue weight to ideological factors.³⁴

Political scientist Emmanuel Karagiannis and social psychologist Clark McCauley (2006) have provided a more sophisticated analysis of HT’s approach to political violence. They argue that “[t]he content of Hizb ut-Tahrir’s ideology, which is based upon a selective interpretation of Islamic theology and history, serves as a barrier to the adoption of violence as a method for the establishment of an Islamic state.”³⁵ HT’s strategy, which has remained essentially unchanged for over fifty years, consists of a three-stage action program emulating the progress of the Prophet Mohammed’s mission: (a) recruitment of the vanguard, (b) Islamization of society, and (c) establishment of the state and the spread of Islam through jihad.³⁶ HT sees itself as being in the second stage of the process, involving the peaceful overthrow of existing Muslim regimes. The group’s task is to persuade society and, especially, the security forces to embrace Islam, the latter because they are the ones who will execute the peaceful *coups d’état* that will depose the current regimes.³⁷ The war that HT fights in the second stage is for the hearts and minds of Muslims; it is not one fought on the battlefield. This is not to say that HT rejects violence *per se*. In the third stage of the action plan, jihad is the method by which the reunified Muslim state spreads Islam throughout the world. However, only the Caliph can declare jihad; HT - or any other non-state group, in its view - cannot take it upon itself to make such a declaration. (Resistance to foreign occupation, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the absence of Caliphal sanction, however, is permitted.) In this sense, HT’s conception of political violence is similar to the state-centric view of the West: violence sanctioned by the (Islamic) state is legitimate, while that engaged in without the authority of the state is terrorism (again, except in the face of foreign invasion of Muslim lands).³⁸

Karagiannis and McCauley (2006) speculate, however, that, under certain circumstances, HT and its followers might resort to violence. For example, the group could decide to deviate from the Prophet Mohammed’s three-stage model. Alternatively, it could claim that matters had already moved to the third stage of jihad, for example, if a genuine Muslim leader should seize power in some

state and credibly declare the re-establishment of the Caliphate. Repressive state action against the group, in particular the suppression or elimination of its leadership, could cause the movement to fracture, with break-away factions subsequently engaging in violence. Or, the group could align itself with the military in some country in a violent grab for power.³⁹

So, the question remains: Is Hizb-ut-Tahrir an ANSA? Should the group fall under our analytical microscope? Given the ambiguities in the group’s ideology and strategy with respect to the use of violence, culminating in the fact that we cannot with confidence rule out the group’s resort to such methods under certain circumstances, the case can be made that HT should be considered an ANSA for analytical purposes.

Note the qualification “for analytical purposes.” The term ANSA is not a policy prescriptive designation. Simply because a group is identified as an ANSA does not necessarily imply that governments should take some form of suppressive counter-action against them. Those are decisions that must be based on a different

kind of assessment, specifically, on an intelligence-based threat assessment. Here, we are only interested in advancing our understanding of the motivations and intentions of a select population of non-state actors. The term ANSA is used to identify that particular population of interest from a basic research rather than an operational law enforcement or national security standpoint.

Autonomy from state control.

An ANSA not only exists outside the formal state institutional structure, but retains the capacity for independent decision. In other words, it is an autonomous entity, not merely an appendage of a state or its security forces; it operates beyond the responsible control of governments.⁴⁰ While it may actively support and collaborate with a regime - and receive the regime’s support in return - this cooperation stems from a perceived coincidence of ANSA and state interests rather than as a response to superior orders.

The relationship between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - Ejército del Pueblo (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People’s Army, known as FARC - EP or FARC) and the Venezuelan regime of deceased President Hugo Chavez well illustrates this point. In May 2011, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) published a 240 page dossier analyzing email communications and strategic documents found in eight computer data storage devices belonging to Luis Edgar Devía Silva (aka Raúl Reyes), one of seven members of FARC’s leadership council (formally, the Secretariat) and the head of its International Committee (COMINTER).⁴¹ Reyes was killed and the electronic archive retrieved in a March 2008 Colombian military raid on a FARC camp across the border in Ecuador. The archive sheds light on the pragmatically cooperative but often stormy relationship between FARC and the Venezuelan government. President Chavez saw the Colombian ANSA as a strategic ally in defending his Bolivarian Revolution against US aggression, as well as a partner in creating a revolutionary bloc throughout the region. Accordingly, he allowed it to maintain support zones in the border regions with Colombia, and promised financial and other material support (although he

“An ANSA not only exists outside the formal state institutional structure, but retains the capacity for independent decision.”

often failed to deliver on these promises, much to the chagrin of FARC leaders). Despite a souring of relations in 2004, Chavez sought to reconcile with the group after an 18-month breach, an initiative that coincided with a marked downturn in relations with Bogotá. In return for Venezuelan support, FARC helped to train the regime's paramilitaries in guerilla and urban warfare after the 2002 coup that briefly ousted Chavez from power. The archive also contains hints that FARC may have been asked to assassinate two of Chavez's domestic political opponents. Nevertheless, while willing to collaborate with Caracas to advance its own interests, FARC retained its operational independence. Based on his earlier analysis of the same Reyes documents, NEFA Senior Investigator Douglas Farah (2008) concluded that "the long-cordial relationship between the FARC and Chávez has grown from one of friendship to one of allies and business partners [emphasis added]," with "each side [using] the other to advance a particular agenda."⁴² In other words, FARC was not and is not a 'mere cat's paw' of the Chavez regime.

control exercised through "hidden" agents embedded in the population.⁴³

These four defining characteristics are admittedly restrictive. They limit ANSAs to a subset of non-state actors that employ violence in social conflict settings. Those excluded include criminal groups, state-controlled paramilitaries, and private security companies (PSCs)/private military companies (PMCs), among others. Nevertheless, these characteristics provide us with the basic elements needed to frame a working definition of ANSA:

An autonomously operating planned group that has the capacity to use violence to achieve political ends.

Note the territoriality requirement - that is, the extent to which an ANSA's aspirations and/or activities are tied to a particular territory - is ignored so as to encompass de-territorialized or transnational actors within the scope of the definition. Note also the added characteristic of 'planned group,' discussed above, to

differentiate ANSAs from spontaneous collections of individuals who come together in, say, street demonstrations or riots.

International relations theorist Ulrich Schneckener (2009) adopts a similar definition to that presented here.⁴⁴ Significantly, though, he does not limit ANSAs to the pursuit of political ends, thereby including criminals, marauders and mercenaries, and PSCs/PMCs within his universe of ANSAs. We do not consider these to be ANSAs, but include them within the broader category of Violent Non-state Actors (VNSAs).⁴⁵ International relations specialist Kledja Mulaj (2009) defines VNSAs as "...non-state armed groups that resort to organized violence as a tool to achieve their goals."⁴⁶ These two terms, ANSA and VNSA, though similar, are not quite the same. Like Schneckener (2009), Mulaj does not qualify "goals" in her definition. Consequently, the term VNSA can apply to a wide variety of violent or potentially violent actors, such as criminal groups, militias, warlords, and others who pursue a wide range of goals beyond the strictly political. Indeed, it is precisely the nature of these goals that distinguishes

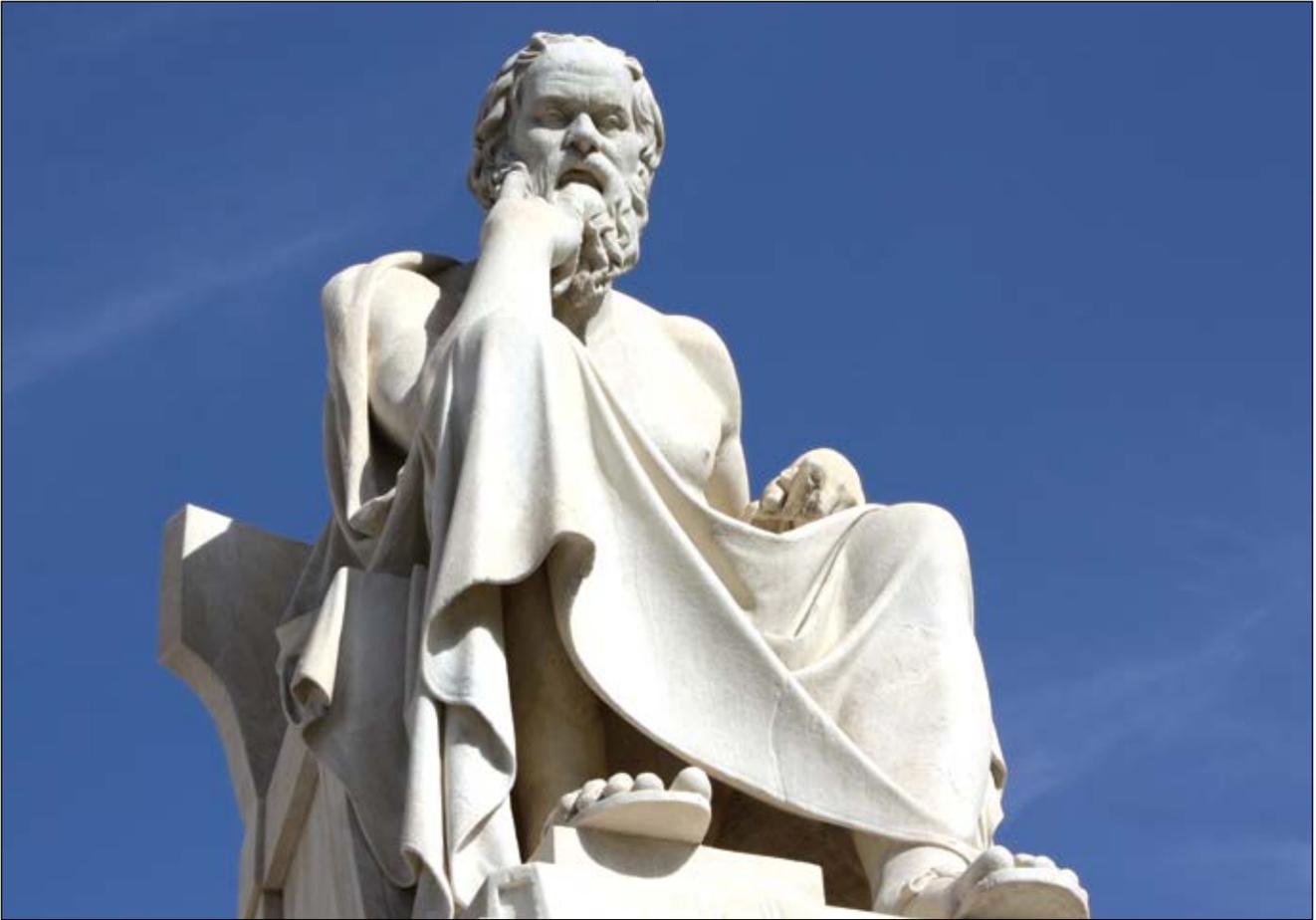
ANSAs from VNSAs. A VNSA may pursue any ends - criminal, mercenary, political, millenarian, and so on - whereas an ANSA is specifically limited to the pursuit, in the main, of political goals. Hence, ANSAs logically constitute a sub-category of VNSAs. That is, an ANSA is necessarily a VNSA, but a VNSA is not necessarily



FARC presence in Venezuela, 1999-2010.

Some degree of territorial control.

An ANSA effectively controls a territory (not necessarily precisely delimited) and its resident population. This domination does not necessarily require a permanent, visible presence. The ANSA's presence may be intermittent and its



Socrates in Athens.

an ANSA. It all comes down to the ends that the non-state actor in question is pursuing through the use or threatened use of violence.

Are ANSAs the only violent or potentially violent groups in the battlespace? Certainly not. Are they even the most important VNSAs in the operating environment? Not necessarily. Consider, for example, the current deadly situation in Mexico. In the southern state of Chiapas, the revolutionary leftist ANSA Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation - EZLN) launched an armed uprising against the Mexican government in 1994. Is this uprising the fountainhead of the widespread violence that has plagued Mexico for the past several years? The answer is no. Since its brief and abortive insurrection in the mid-1990s, the EZLN has focused its efforts primarily on non-violent means to draw national and international attention to its political demands. Rather, the responsibility for the deaths of some 47,515 people in Mexico over the last five years⁴⁷ can be laid squarely on the doorstep of drug cartels such as the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas, rather than the EZLN.⁴⁸

ANSAs are certainly a part of the complex equation in the battlespace, but, as the Mexican experience demonstrates, there are other violent groups who also populate that space. These other VNSAs do not fall into our working definition of ANSA, however, since they do not meet the basic requirements of autonomous decision and the use of violence for political ends. Though more inclusive than insurgent or terrorist, ANSA is not an umbrella term

that encompasses each and every violent or potentially violent actor in a conflict space.

There is another reason why we prefer ANSA as the identifier of choice for these actors. Though, as Mulaj's (2009) definition makes clear, violence is a tool - and not necessarily *the* tool or the only tool - to which VSNAs resort, for those not schooled in the subtleties of the terminology (in particular, individuals at the policymaking level), "violent" non-state actor might give the mistaken impression that these groups are committed exclusively and single-mindedly to violence. This clouds the fact that not all ANSAs are hopelessly irreconcilable and can never under any circumstances change their goals or strategies, most especially, their resort to collective political violence. Hence, our preference for the term 'armed' NSA. Rather than an invariant strategy or an inherent trait, it suggests a potential or capacity for violence which these groups may tap into in any given set of circumstances.

Conclusion

The beginning of wisdom is the definition of terms.

—Socrates

The arguments presented in the preceding pages are relatively straightforward. The terms we commonly use to identify irregular adversaries in the contemporary operating environment do not pass muster. They are emotionally charged, politically inflammatory, and analytically challenged. In their stead, we

offer up an alternative label - the Armed Non-state Actor - a comprehensive, analytically and emotionally neutral term of description, and set out a working definition of this technical expression. Assuming these arguments have been persuasive, the question still remains: what does this matter? Is the foregoing an interesting but essentially irrelevant semantic exercise? To answer this, we must place this in the broader context of knowledge development and communication within the defence and security community.

Shared, standardized terminology is necessary for defence science and technology (S&T) knowledge generation and development. The contemporary operating environment is overwhelmingly complex, too immense for any one individual to intuitively grasp fully or holistically. That is simply beyond the cognitive capacities of human beings. Consequently, we rely on knowledge development through the analytical method: break down the whole into its constituent elements to facilitate 'drilling deep' into these smaller parts, then reassembling the parts to better understand the emergent whole. The specification and definition of standard terms - like ANSA - is the essential first step in this knowledge development process. It allows us to clearly identify the entities of interest in the social conflict space so that we may efficiently and effectively focus our (limited) intellectual resources on this selected population. It allows us to bound the problem space, to reduce the complexity of the whole to manageable proportions, and in so doing to support and sustain the process of defence S&T knowledge building.

Shared, standardized terminology is also essential for clarity in communication. DND's statement of Defence Terminology policy is unequivocal on this point:

Standardized, consistent and readily available terminology is required to create and maintain a common vocabulary to enable clear communication and understanding, and to enhance interoperability of people and information systems within DND/CAF, with our principle [sic] allies, other government departments and agencies, the defence industry and interest groups.⁴⁹

Mutually understood, precisely defined defence and security terminology allows us to talk to each other without returning to first principles in every conversation. Standard terms - like ANSA - embody a wealth of implicit information. Each time we want to speak about this class of non-conventional actor, we simply use the shorthand term ANSA, on the assumption that our interlocutors share with us the same baseline knowledge of the term. In other words, we don't have to repeat the points discussed at length in this article each and every time we refer to an ANSA. The use of shared, standardly-defined terms greatly enhances the efficiency and comprehensibility of knowledge communication and transmission.

To sum up, this exercise in terminological elaboration is more than a mug's game. From the standpoint of defence S&T knowledge development and communication, this is the first critical step along the path to advancing our understanding of an increasingly important class of irregular adversary in the future battlespace.



Reuters RTXQ75F by Stringer Afghanistan

A Taliban fighter poses with weapons in an undisclosed location in Afghanistan, 30 October 2009.

Canadian Press/AP photo 1133535 by Nabil Jurane



Shiite demonstrators protest against actions of coalition troops in Iraq, 12 August 2004.

NOTES

1. At DRDC Toronto, he is engaged in exploratory and applied research on human cognitive and social performance in adversarial contexts related to defence and security, specializing in the psycho-sociology of insurgency and terrorism. He is currently the Project Manager for a multi-year project developing a conceptual framework for understanding the motivations, intentions, and behaviours of Armed Non-state Actors (ANSAs). The author would like to thank Keith Stewart, Peter Tikuisis, and Dwayne Hobbes of the Socio-Cognitive Systems Section at DRDC Toronto for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The views expressed here, however, are the responsibility solely of the author.
2. "Insurgency," in *Defence Terminology Bank*, at <http://terminology.mil.ca/TermBaseWeb/Print.aspx?srcexpid=1932417>, accessed 28 May 2012.
3. "Terrorist," in *Defence Terminology Bank*, at <http://terminology.mil.ca/TermBaseWeb/Print.aspx?srcexpid=2013557>, accessed 28 May 2012.
4. M. Kelly, "Rumsfeld downplays resistance in Iraq," in *Associated Press*, 19 June 2003.
5. G. Bruno, "Backgrounder: Finding a place for the 'Sons of Iraq,'" Council on Foreign Relations, 9 January 2009.
6. Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, *Quarterly data report Q.1 2012*, Kabul, Afghanistan: ANSO, 2012, p. 6. Improvised explosive device (IED) and indirect fire attacks rank second and third, respectively, in the Taliban's tactical portfolio.
7. United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, *Afghanistan: Annual report 2011—Protection of civilians in armed conflict. Executive summary and recommendations*, Kabul, Afghanistan: UNAMA, 2012, p. 1.
8. G. Peters, *Seeds of terror: How heroin is bank-rolling the Taliban and al Qaeda* (New York, NY: St. Martin's, 2009), p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
11. S. Tavernise, "Relations sour between Shiites and Iraq militia," in *The New York Times*, 12 October 2007.
12. T. Peter, "After setbacks, Sadr redirects Mahdi Army," in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 11 August 2008.
13. "Non-state actor," *Defence Terminology Bank*, at <http://terminology.mil.ca/TermBaseWeb/Print.aspx?srcexpid=2112183>, accessed 28 May 2012.
14. For the distinction between *unit* and *level* of analysis, see A. Yurdusev, "'Level of analysis' and 'unit of analysis': A case for distinction," in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 1993, pp. 77-88.
15. J. Scott and G. Marshall (eds.), *A dictionary of sociology* (3rd Edition) (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 257. The term *group* also refers to aggregates or categories of individuals (i.e., social classes, demographic groups, etc.) who may not share a feeling of unity or engage in regular social interaction. Alternative definitions in the social science literature highlight different features of these social connections, emphasizing, among others, the communicative, structural, psychological, and/or identity aspects of the group. For a selection of definitions, see D. Forsyth, *Group dynamics* (4th Edition) (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), p. 4, Table 1-1.
16. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised Edition) (London: Verso, 2006), p. 6.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
18. Forsyth, *Group dynamics*, p. 6.
19. *Ibid.* Advances in social media greatly facilitate the degree of coordination that can underlie seemingly "spontaneous" gatherings such as the pro-democracy demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring. As one Egyptian activist remarked, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world" - quoted in P. Howard, "The Arab Spring's cascading effects," in *Miller-McCune*, 23 February 2011.
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21. *Ibid.*
22. D. Petrasek, *Ends and means: Human rights approaches to armed groups* (Versoix, Switzerland: International Council on Human Rights Policy, 2001), p. 5.
23. C. Holmqvist, "Engaging armed non-state actors in post-conflict settings," in A. Bryden and H. Hänggi (eds.), *Security governance and post-conflict peacebuilding* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005), p. 45.

24. Geneva Call, *Armed non-state actors and landmines: Vol. 1. A global report profiling NSAs and their use, acquisition, production, transfer and stockpiling of landmines* (Geneva: Geneva Call, 2005), p. 10.
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26. See Bruderlein, *The role of non-state actors...*, pp. 6-7; Glaser, *Negotiated access...*, pp. 20-22; P. Policzer, *Neither terrorists nor freedom fighters*, Armed Groups Project Working Paper 5 (Calgary, AB: University of Calgary, Latin American Research Centre, 2005), p. 6.
27. M. Sagemann, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
28. For a discussion of other functions of collective political violence, see J. Moore, "Note to File: The functions of insurgent violence: A systems perspective," in *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 2, forthcoming.
29. E. Karagiannis and C. McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami: Evaluating the threat posed by a radical Islamic group that remains nonviolent," in *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 18, 2006, p. 317.
30. Z. Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir: Islam's political insurgency* [Monograph] (Washington, D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2004), p. 1.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
32. For reference to the HT leaflets containing these condemnations, see "Banning non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), is the real threat to the British way of life" [Online petition], in *Petition Online*, at <http://www.petitiononline.com/HTban/petition.html>, accessed 28 May 2012. Please note that reference in this article to the information contained in the petition does not in any way imply approval of or support for the petition itself.
33. Baran, *Hizb ut-Tahrir...*, p. 11.
34. A. Gilligan, "Hizb ut Tahrir is not a gateway to terrorism, claims Whitehall report," in *The Telegraph*, 25 July 2010.
35. Karagiannis and McCauley, "Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami...", p. 329.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 326.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 328.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 329-330.
40. For more on the concept of responsible control, see James Moore, "Beyond the pale? The international legal basis of the Bush Doctrine" [Unpublished Masters thesis] (Toronto, ON: York University, Osgoode Hall Law School, 2006).
41. J. Lockhart Smith and N. Inkster (eds.), *The FARC files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the secret archive of 'Raúl Reyes'* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011); reviewed in S. Romero, "Venezuela asked Colombian rebels to kill opposition figures, analysis shows," in *The New York Times*, 10 May 2011.
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43. Glaser, *Negotiated access...*, p. 20.
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Reuters RTXEC7S by STR New

Pakistani Taliban fighters sit with their weapons on the back of a truck in Buner, northwest of Islamabad, 24 April 2009.