Assessing Structural Patterns Among Warlord Groups

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Since the end of the Cold War, United States Military has been consistently asked to intervene in failing and failed states to provide humanitarian aid and security to the local populace. This security can take many forms, but the primary antagonist in these recent interventions have been loosely formed local militias under a charismatic authority figure, most often termed a “Warlord.” While Warlords are at the present synonymous with sub-Saharan Africa, they have existed throughout modern history in Africa, Asia, and Central and South America, albeit often under a number of alternate names. Given their essential ubiquity within faltering regions of the developing world, it is necessary for the United States Military and other interventionists to conduct basic scientific research aimed at understanding the nature, function, and structure of these warlord groups.

Unfortunately, the existing literature on Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) has yet to address this task. Because scholars studying VNSAs primarily utilize thin, anecdotal evidence and non-replicable methods, such as simple descriptive narrative (Silke, 2004), the field has been able to offer little more than untested theories about the structure and organizational function of Warlord groups. Put most simply, the existing literature assumes (but does not prove) that Warlord groups operate as unitary actors that lack internal divisions. Is this conventional wisdom accurate? Are warlord groups structured around a single, highly-central individual, or do they contain distinct factions? More generally, what types of structural models do warlord groups utilize?

Resolving these questions would advance both pure social-science and policy making. A formal model of warlord groups has the potential to significantly refine the academic community’s theoretical understanding of these organizations by either supporting or refuting the conventional wisdom’s ego-centric model of warlordism. In the latter instance, a formal model may also yield a more nuanced, empirically-grounded theory on the organizational structures underlying this phenomenon. Moreover, formal models of warlord groups may reveal the best means to foster stability by fracturing hostile movements, and such models will likely aid efforts to predict the sorts of organizational splintering most likely to occur if hardline members of warlord group were to resist reconciliation efforts.

Consequently, this research effort seeks funding to support the construction and
analysis of a longitudinal, multi-modal, and multi-dimensional agent-based model of warlord groups. Given the dearth of existing rigorous inquiries, the analysis will limit its initial scope and will exclusively consider two inter-related conflicts, each of which contained several distinct warlord groups: the Liberian civil war (1991-1997) and the Sierra Leonean civil war (1991-2002). However, contingent on funding renewal and the availability of data, subsequent iterations of the study can assess regional differences among Warlord groups by expanding the scope of the inquiry to include organizations operating in other parts of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America.