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## Social Control in Civil Wars

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### ABSTRACT

The primacy of territorial control in theories of civil war has advanced our understanding of war dynamics, most notably lethal violence, but has hindered our understanding of the distinct ways in which armed groups seek control over people. We propose to complement territorial control by separately conceptualising social control, which we define as the extent to which armed groups have access to people and their resources. Access to people requires different tactics compared to access to territory, because people are mobile. We develop a framework in which state and non-state armed groups choose whether to prioritise territorial or social control first in order to gain sovereignty, which requires both territorial and social control. Alternatively, armed groups choose to pursue territorial control or social control only, resulting in corridors or social networks, respectively. We illustrate the advantages of the framework by showing how it allows us to analyse armed groups' tactics to control access to people, to connect research agendas on armed group violence, governance, and civilian displacement, and to better conceptualise armed group power and strength.

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### Introduction

Territorial control is a core concept in civil war studies. It is a central factor in causal theories of violence, a scope condition for rebel governance, and an indicator for the strength of armed groups in academic and policy assessments (Kalyvas 2006, Mampilly 2011, Arjona *et al.* 2015, Asal and Nagel 2021, Bahiss *et al.* 2022). Developed in Stathis Kalyvas's (2006) *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, control in civil wars has 'a clear territorial foundation: rule presupposes a constant and credible armed presence' (Kalyvas 2006, p. 132). Kalyvas reasons that after armed groups establish an armed presence, violence is used to induce civilians to collaborate with them. Over the last

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twenty years, this line of reasoning has anchored key insights into armed group and civilian behaviour, such as why and where rebels govern (Mampilly 2011, Arjona 2016), and why and when civilians resist armed groups (Rubin 2020, Masullo 2021, Jentzsch 2022). Additionally, territorial control is often assumed to be *the* core goal of armed group violence (Bahiss *et al.* 2022).

In this article, we argue that the primacy of territorial control in theories of civil war has advanced our understanding of war dynamics, most notably lethal violence, but has also hindered our understanding of the distinct ways in which armed groups seek control over people. Building on the concept of territorial control as a 'domain of governance, specifically over access to territory and its resources' (Rubin and Stewart 2022, p. 17), we define social control as the extent to which armed groups have access to people and their resources. Access to people requires different tactics compared to access to territory, in part because unlike territory, people are mobile. Armed groups use coercive measures to move or constrain the movement of people to secure access to some groups within a population, and exclude others. Armed groups extract resources from people with a mix of coercive and less coercive measures, as illustrated by the rebel governance literature. What remains understudied are the ways in which armed groups do so by governing the mobility of the population (Leimpek 2020).

In our conception, both social and territorial control are necessary components of sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> Armed groups may pursue sovereignty in some places and times; or they may settle for territorial control or social control only. We present a framework that conceives of the pursuit of these goals as a sequence. Armed groups that pursue sovereignty can establish territorial control first and then social control (the sequence that much of the civil war literature focuses on); or they can pursue social control first and then territorial control. Where armed groups aim for territorial control only, they establish territorial corridors, and where they aim for social control only, they tap social networks for resources. Each sequence is likely to be associated with different forms of violence and governance to secure access to people. We illustrate the model with examples drawn from recent civil war research.

Explicitly conceptualising social control complements existing theories of civil war violence in important ways and integrates what have become relatively decentralised research agendas on violence, governance, and displacement. Broadening the analysis to how armed groups prioritise different types of control allows us to recognise the various sources of armed group power and strength, which has important consequences for policy assessments and development (Bahiss *et al.* 2022). It also points to new avenues for research on armed groups' and civilians' choices.

This article first discusses the concept of territorial control. Then we take *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* (Kalyvas 2006) as a starting point to inquire how the dominant focus on territorial control has shaped the

study of armed group and civilian behaviour and assessments of armed group strength. The subsequent section introduces the concept of social control and explains how it relates to territorial control. We then introduce our framework on the different paths to sovereignty, including instances in which armed groups pursue territorial control or social control only. In the subsequent sections, we illustrate the utility of the framework by discussing examples from various civil war settings. The last section concludes by extending examples beyond civil war settings and discussing further avenues for research.

## Territorial Control

The civil war literature that has emerged over the past 20 years has advanced our understanding of the violence and governance that non-state armed groups and states engage in. In his *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, Kalyvas (2006) pioneered a new research agenda on civil war dynamics beyond conflict onset, duration, or termination. The book famously generates implications for how civilians and armed groups 'jointly produce' violence in irregular civil wars, and in particular selective violence, depending on the level of territorial control that armed groups exert. Territorial control is defined in this framework as military presence in a given territory (Kalyvas 2006, p. 132).

Control, for Kalyvas, stems from the concept of sovereignty. He distinguishes between fragmented and segmented sovereignty, which imply different relationships with populations living in a territory. Populations may be under full control by an armed group, or 'shared' with a rival armed group, or they may fall outside of their control (Kalyvas 2006, p. 88). Fragmented sovereignty is defined as shared sovereignty; segmented sovereignty is when control is divided between groups, not shared. At the core of this concept of sovereignty is a spatial understanding of control, which assumes a stable population living in a given territory. Control over the population then derives from territorial control.

Civil war research has since treated territorial control as a cause of distinct types of violence against civilians, as a necessary condition for armed group governance, and a cause of different forms of civilian resistance to armed groups. For example, Victor Asal and Robert U. Nagel (2021, p. 137) argue that territorial control increases the likelihood that armed groups perpetrate sexual violence against civilians, which in turn serves the purpose of enhancing the control of 'human, sexual, and reproductive capital'. In terms of governance, Ana Arjona (2016) argues that a long time horizon is a necessary condition for rebel governance. This time horizon is in turn explained by the level of territorial control the group enjoys. Subsequent work on rebel governance makes territorial control a core condition for

different governance outcomes (Rubin 2020, Breslawski 2021, Cunningham and Loyle 2021). Work on civilian agency relies on territorial control to explain various outcomes of violent and non-violent civilian resistance to armed groups (Rubin 2020, Masullo 2021, Jentzsch 2022).

Some scholars have also extended the implications of territorial control beyond irregular civil wars. In her work, Laia Balcells (2017) shows that in conventional civil wars, territorial control (behind the front lines) is associated with direct, face-to-face violence, while armed groups are more likely to perpetrate indirect violence (such as aerial bombardment) behind the enemy's front line. For Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca and Luis de la Calle (2009), whether or not non-state armed groups control territory determines what sorts of violence the group is able and likely to perpetrate, which distinguishes whether they are insurgent or terrorist organisations. In these works, territorial control facilitates or constrains certain types of violence by providing access to specific resources and modes of action.

Prioritising territorial control as an analytical choice has produced valuable insights, but the collapse of sovereignty into one dimension, territorial control, implies that control over people is secondary and dependent on it. We return to a concept of sovereignty that gives equal importance to control over territory and over people. Daniel Philpott (2011, p. 561) defines sovereignty as 'supreme authority within a territory'. The reach of a sovereign's authority across both a physical space (or territory), and the people living in it, varies within civil wars – but they do not necessarily covary. We introduce the concept of *social control* to analyse different types of control separately and to theorise different paths to sovereignty.

## Social Control

To define social control, we build on Rubin and Stewart's (2022, p. 17) concept of territorial control as 'a domain of governance, specifically over access to territory and its resources'. We define social control as the extent to which armed groups have access to *people* and their resources.

This definition departs from the sociological roots of the concept. In sociology and legal theory, social control is conceptualised more narrowly, as a non- or less coercive form of control under which a community regulates itself to work together towards common goals (Janowitz 1975, Black 1976).<sup>2</sup> In such an order, community residents or elites surveil the community, triggering compliance with common values and goals. In our concept, centred on having access to people and their resources, we attribute power to the armed group to define the common values and goals and to enforce compliance with such goals. Enforcement can rely on non-coercive tactics; social control has both a coercive *and* non-coercive character.<sup>3</sup>

The term ‘social control’ is better suited than related concepts such as population control, collaboration, rebel governance, or politics. First, social control is an intuitive, complementary term to territorial control. It subsumes the concept of population control from counterinsurgency theory and practice (as we discuss below; see Galula 1964). A related term, collaboration, describes civilians’ behaviour, often under extreme coercion (see Malthaner 2015),<sup>4</sup> whereas social control is an ambition of armed groups (under conditions discussed below). Second, with its inclusion of access to people as a critical component, social control allows us to consider armed groups’ broad range of tactics to secure such access that can go beyond achieving territorial control. This distinguishes the concept from terms like rebel governance. We consider politics too broad a term to describe specific relationships between armed groups and the population. Third, the term is familiar and has been used by conflict scholars, but without a clear conceptualisation (Gerring 1999).

Importantly, social control is a relational outcome, meaning that the degree to which armed groups succeed in generating it depends on civilians’ compliance with their attempts (Migdal 1988). One crucial necessary condition of social control is sustained contact between civilians and armed groups, and one way for civilians to avoid control is to move (Arnon *et al.* 2023). Armed groups recognise this, as we explore below, and will attempt to restrict or engender such mobility.

## Social and Territorial Control as Armed Groups’ Options

Conceiving of social control separately from territorial control allows us to identify what is a key – and overlooked – decision that armed groups make in the context of civil wars: whether to pursue sovereignty through territorial or social control *first*,<sup>5</sup> or *only* territorial or social control in a given area.<sup>6</sup> We illustrate this set of decisions in Figure 1.

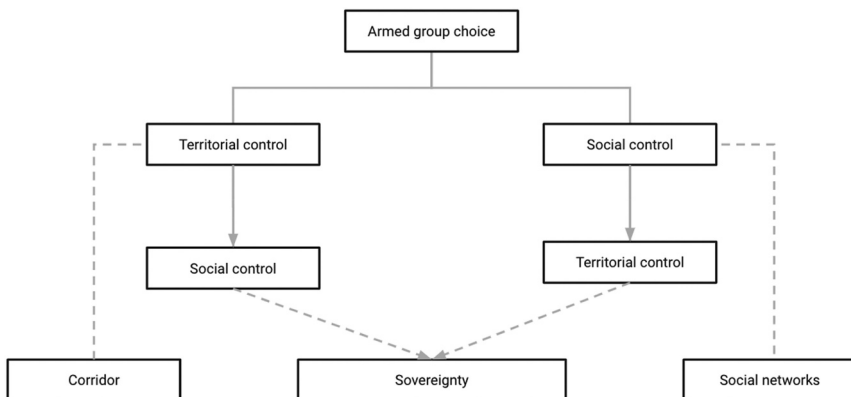


Figure 1. Armed groups’ choices.

Disentangling social from territorial control allows scholars to account for the fact that unlike territory, people have agency and are mobile – a fact often overlooked in counterinsurgency theory and practice (Jardine 2012). This observation leads us to theorise when and where armed groups may aim to reconfigure the ‘social’ of a territory through displacement or forced resettlement, or other forms of restricting mobility. Such theories should also reflect the agency that civilians have to stay in or leave a territory, even under constraints. We develop expectations about the types of violence that both state and non-state armed groups might pursue depending on their goal, and which form of control they pursue (first). If, on the other hand, armed groups begin by establishing social control, we expect them to mobilise people’s resources in less coercive ways, by establishing or exploiting existing relationships with communities. They may also encourage colonisation to expand territorial control. If armed groups start by establishing some degree of territorial control, we reason that they will use violence to gain access to people. This violence, or the threat of violence, pushes civilians to move in or out of the controlled space with the aim to determine *who resides* in the territory armed groups seek to control – even before armed groups perpetrate violence to shape the *behaviour* of the individuals residing there (Steele 2017).

We discuss each point in the figure and what we expect armed groups to do with respect to displacement and mobility. We begin by discussing territorial control in its ‘pure’ form, which we argue is closest to establishing a strategic corridor.

### **Territorial Control of Corridors**

When armed groups only control territory, we refer to areas without a civilian population. Civilians may be employed by armed groups to extract resources from the territory, to transport goods, or to oversee such transactions, but there are no communities that exist in-and-of themselves in these areas. Armed groups may opt to establish corridors when they need land for strategic purposes, such as drug routes, or control over mining operations. Establishing a strategic corridor may lead armed groups to depopulate an area, meaning that they will expel residents regardless of their characteristics or behaviour (Lichtenheld 2020). Because this measure is very costly, armed groups prefer strategic corridors in areas where few residents reside to begin with. This kind of violence is unlikely to be related to direct competition with other armed groups.

## Social Control of Networks

In contrast to 'pure' territorial control, armed groups may need or opt to settle for 'pure' social control, rather than full sovereignty. This choice establishes networks of armed group influence that secure access to and resources of the network's members, such as political support or taxes, often with less coercive measures than outright violence. State and non-state armed groups' efforts to establish social control in the absence of territorial control draws our attention to how some rebel governance mechanisms operate even in the absence of sovereignty (Worrall 2017). For instance, the Taliban convinced local populations to pay taxes, part of which financed conflict resolution mechanisms before the group's takeover in August 2021 (Amiri and Jackson 2022). Similarly, Cyanne Loyle (2021) documents judicial processes by armed groups outside of their territorial control in Nepal. Kathleen Cunningham *et al.* (2021) find that insurgent groups influence electoral processes outside their areas of control. Francis O'Connor (2019) characterises insurgents' engagement with civilians in areas they do not control in terms of 'routinised insurgent space', which include service provision and judicial proceedings. Alex Waterman (2023, p. 287) describes how the ULFA in Assam '[...] combined selective violence with widespread publicity from sympathetic local media to project an aura of power and authority, exercising social rather than territorial control. For the group's foes, this created a "fear psychosis" whereas for sympathisers and supporters it amplified the perception of the group as a "Robin Hood" actor'. Kasper Hoffmann and Judith Verweijen (2019) analyse how the Mai Mai groups in Eastern Congo shape civilian behaviour and show the extent to which communities regulate themselves in response to armed group influences – highlighting a much more tacit exercise of power in the absence of clear territorial control.

Why do armed groups opt to pursue social control? This may be the case, for instance, for armed groups that are significantly disadvantaged militarily, as Sánchez-Cuenca and de la Calle (2009) point out for terrorist organisations operating in highly consolidated states such as in Europe. Sarah Parkinson (2013) documents the ways in which Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon rely on, mobilise and integrate social networks into their formal hierarchies to advance their goals and withstand repression. Jihadist armed groups in Mali introduce more 'clandestine and less visible' forms of rule that shape civilian behaviour as a 'survival strategy' given the strong military counterinsurgent response to their military presence (Rupesinghe and Diall 2023).

In other contexts, the power imbalance between armed groups may be temporary: this would characterise insurgent organisations that spend years building up social control over time before attempting to establish territorial control. Paul Staniland (2014) characterises armed groups' ability to eventually succeed in challenging sovereignty as dependent on their social



networks, either vertical or horizontal. For instance, AQIM ‘was able to gain initial ground in the north through marriage alliances more than a decade before the outbreak of the recent rebellion’ (Bleck *et al.* 2018, p. 174). These important works focus on insurgencies, which suggests that weaker armed groups are more likely to aim for social control before attempting to challenge for sovereignty. In the next section, we turn to contexts in which armed groups pursue sovereignty beginning with social control before territorial control.

## Social Path to Sovereignty

In some cases, armed groups leverage the social control they establish to gain territorial control. They can do this by taking advantage of certain shifts to rapidly convert social networks in a place into territorial control; or by forcing or encouraging ‘loyal’ civilians to move into territories where they do not have territorial control. The former process builds on armed groups’ attempts to gain legitimacy through taxing local populations and offering conflict resolution mechanisms. To take the example of the Taliban above, Ashley Jackson (2022) argues that the Taliban’s system of taxation, and the legitimacy that came with it, enabled them to take control of Afghanistan in August 2021. The latter process includes tactics of resettlement (McNamee 2018, McNamee and Zhang 2019), colonisation (Frymer 2017, McNamee 2023), and forced relocation (Lichtenheld 2020) – all tactics that aim to leverage a connection between armed groups (or states) and people they consider loyal in order to gain territorial control.<sup>7</sup>

Tactics such as resettlement or colonisation incentivise or coerce ‘loyal’ civilians to move into contested territories. These sorts of measures have also fallen under ‘demographic engineering’, particularly by states.<sup>8</sup> During the expansion of the United States, for example, the federal government moved ‘preferred populations onto contested territory in order to engineer the demography of the region in a manner that both secured and consolidated their territorial control’ (Frymer 2017, p. 9). McNamee and Zhang (2019) show that the Chinese and Russian states encouraged migration by ‘loyal’ core group members to border regions to shore up their control of their territories. In Colombia, the rebel group FARC frequently organised the occupation of unused public lands, and sometimes private estates, which functioned as an informal land redistribution program (e.g., Ballvé 2021, p. 39, 43). Scholars refer to this practice as ‘armed colonisation’ (Ramírez Tobón 2001).

Another tactic armed groups use is displacement in retreat to maintain access to a population and deprive a rival of the same. During Mozambique’s civil war, when the government had to retreat from a town they could no longer hold, they tried to convince people to move to the nearest town under government control (Pereira 1999,

p. 47). The government knew that taking over a town without population would not be beneficial to the rebels. And the Renamo rebels acknowledged as much – João Pereira (1999, p. 51) reports that Renamo threatened to kill people if they left with Frelimo.

Armed groups also try to take advantage of displacement to expand their influence. After massive displacement from the Urabá region of Colombia in the early 1990s, many civilians relocated to the urban periphery in Medellín. A former FARC commander explained that this was useful to the FARC: ‘Of course we [kept] in touch with the displaced. It’s part of the revolution’.<sup>9</sup> He noted, ‘If you control the population, you have a chance of controlling the territory’.

Rather than expanding into new territory, and then attempting to control the population living in that territory, both state and rebel armed forces relocate civilians (Zhukov, 2014). The forceful relocation of people, defined as ‘displacement with an inward or “pull” orientation’ (Lichtenheld 2020, p. 257) is a frequent tactic employed by state and non-state actors. As Myron Weiner and Michael Teitelbaum (2001, p. 57) write, ‘The movement of populations by governments as a strategy for establishing territorial control is an ancient practice’. During the civil war in Mozambique, the Renamo rebels relocated people to live in concentric circles around their bases. As a former Renamo combatant stated, ‘The combat was about the people, to have the majority of the people meant to have more security’.<sup>10</sup> Government armed forces resettled the population in camps in and around government-controlled towns. For both the rebels and the government, the contest over territory was less important than the ‘war over people’ (Jentzsch 2022, p. 44); it was a ‘struggle for control of the population’ (Cahen 1993, p. 55).

Forced relocation often coincides with establishing camps. Camps have an important role in gaining and maintaining control over territory, as the history of villagisation for state building and counterinsurgency shows (Scott 1998). Forcing people into camps enables armed groups to control people more easily, deny popular support to the other side, and to ‘sort’ the population into supporters and non-supporters (Lichtenheld 2020). In Uganda, for example, the government began to forcibly relocate people into camps in 1996 to deny support in the form of food, information, recruits and targets for violence to the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) (Janmyr and Mourad 2018).

Forced relocation demonstrates how interrelated social and territorial control are. Nevertheless, considering them sequentially allows us to theorise distinct tactics that armed groups use. In the next section, we point to different tactics associated with the pursuit of territorial control prior to social control.

## Territorial Path to Sovereignty

When armed groups pursue sovereignty by establishing territorial control before social control, the mobility of the population is a key concern of armed groups. Armed groups aim to control this mobility by restricting exit or by enforcing it. The aim is to select the population living in a territory to enhance the armed group's ability to extract resources from them.

Armed groups use political cleansing to expel those they suspect of being loyal to their rival, or difficult to 'convert', from a territory (Steele 2017, p. 53). Dan Slater and Diana Kim (2015, p. 27–28) refer to forcible expulsion as a tactic to 'deal with unwelcome heterogeneity by banishing those categorical groups and individuals perceived as most troublesome from their territorial domain, making them disappear rather than trying to make them behave'. The aftermath of a cleansing campaign leaves a community altered in often devastating ways, but which serve the interests of armed groups.<sup>11</sup> Based on interviews with former paramilitaries, Teo Ballvé (2021, p. 64) writes, 'Paramilitaries' concern with building *una base social* [a social base] came only after the guerrillas had been defeated militarily and their alleged civilian collaborators "cleaned" out and displaced'.

Armed groups also entice civilians to move into territories that they control, or aim for repopulation (Leimpek 2020, Ballvé 2021). Repopulation is an effort to replace former inhabitants of a territory with new residents, under the condition that the new residents will comply with the armed group. Armed groups may seek to repopulate a territory – for instance, the homes abandoned by civilians who were expelled in a cleansing campaign – through incentives such as housing or land, or through coercion. These efforts reflect an understanding that armed groups need a population to establish sovereign areas. Because it is unlikely to be reflected in aggregate estimates of displacement, repopulation is difficult to estimate, but we believe it is an understudied form of movement in civil wars. For example, in Mozambique the government attempted to mobilise people living in rebel-held areas to move to government-held areas through leaflet campaigns (Jentzsch 2022). In Colombia, paramilitaries 'began resettling the deserted farmlands' left by those they displaced years earlier (Ballvé 2021, p. 66). 'The transplants arrived for a variety of reasons: some were displaced from elsewhere, others came at the express invitation of [the paramilitary group], and still others were simply campesinos looking for work, land, or opportunities' (Ballvé 2021, p. 66, see also Gutiérrez Sanín 2003, p. 22).

This path reflects the sequence that Kalyvas (2006) theorises; in his model, civilians stay and comply with whichever armed group exerts more territorial control. In contrast, much of what counterinsurgency theory and practice refers to as 'population control' – the (forceful) separation of the population from the insurgent – also occurs in this path (Galula 1964, United States

Department of the Army 2007, Kilcullen 2009). Conceptualizing social control as a complement to territorial control helps to bridge these theories: armed groups are likely to try to determine *who* resides in the territory, as well as the behaviour of those who stay (Steele 2017).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, even when armed groups want to relocate or expel civilians, civilians are often able to resist relocation and stay (Steele 2009).

While the sequences in our framework belie the often more simultaneous nature of armed groups' aims, the different tactics associated with either one justifies the heuristic. It also allows us to bring together the early, path-breaking work on the dynamics of civil wars with more recent advances on armed groups' social control practices that demonstrate that armed groups are at times much more concerned with social than territorial control (see Bahiss *et al.* 2022).

## Sovereignty

In our framework, we propose that sovereignty – 'supreme authority within a territory' – can be achieved either by pursuing territorial or social control first.<sup>13</sup> Again, our conception of social control draws attention to the importance of having access to people, who are mobile, which is a challenge for armed groups that aim to hold on to sovereignty. As a result, governance measures are likely to be related to residents' mobility and outsiders' entry into sovereign territory. This is why several armed groups have crafted institutions to monitor the movement of civilians that live in their areas of influence (Lichtenheld 2020, Leimpek 2020, van Baalen 2021). For example, in Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers kept strict tabs on population movements, and issued short-term travel permissions. Residents knew that if they failed to return, family members would be at risk of kidnapping or recruitment (Leimpek 2020, p. 7, 121). In Iraq, Mara Revkin (2019) documents the restrictions that the Islamic State imposed on territories it controlled, which included visa-like permissions.

At its most extreme, armed groups may impose confinement on communities to restrict mobility. Confinement refers to instances when armed groups restrict civilians' ability to leave their community either temporarily or more permanently. Theresa Leimpek (2020, p. 121) writes, 'In the Sri Lankan context, LTTE's dependency on the civilian population translated into the institutionalisation of confinement measures enshrined in their governance system'. Confinement is difficult to observe, particularly with quantitative indicators, but can create an incredibly challenging situation for civilians.

Armed groups also create orders and use less coercive tactics to retain a social base in the territories they control. In Elisabeth J. Wood's (2003) pathbreaking study, she argues that civilians support insurgent groups in spite of the risks when they derive 'pleasure in agency' from contributing to

programmes such as land redistribution. Sebastian van Baalen (2021, p. 11) reports that the Forces Nouvelles in Côte d'Ivoire offered services to prevent people from leaving, in spite of their uncontested territorial control: 'Supporting the schools [in southern Man] prevented an exodus that would have left the rebels with a smaller population base'. Not everyone is welcome to stay in these communities, and armed groups are likely to impose targeted exile against those who violate their rule.

Finally, armed groups also impose regulations about how much access outsiders have to communities under their control. For example, when people came to areas of FARC influence in Colombia, Andrés Vargas Castillo (2019, p. 185) writes,

guerrillas would [...] visit newcomers to ask who they were, where they came from, and what they were doing in the area. These latter actions were oriented towards keeping track of population movement into the area and are a strong indicator of territorial control by insurgents.

When such restrictions are impossible to impose, armed groups may resort to lethal violence. Ruling armed groups may be threatened by civilians who have been displaced and arrive *en masse* from rival territories, or whose profile suggests they may not support the ruler. Sigrid Weber (2023) finds evidence that in Iraq, ruling armed groups were likely to perpetrate violence against arriving internally displaced people if they had a 'suspect' profile.<sup>14</sup>

The institutions we have described in this section connect the threat of civilians leaving certain areas – or the 'wrong' civilians arriving – with both armed groups' governance and the violence they might perpetrate to try to control civilian mobility.<sup>15</sup> To achieve sovereignty, armed groups seek both territorial and social control.

## Conclusion

Conceptualising social control in a way that complements theories of territorial control opens up important avenues for further research on armed group behaviour that cannot easily be explained with a narrow focus on territorial control. Theorising how and when armed groups prioritise social control helps us understand different types of armed group behaviour, including non-lethal forms of violence against civilians such as displacement, and of civilian behaviour, including forms of resistance to armed groups. Civilian displacement affects orders of magnitude more victims than lethal forms of civil war violence, and our framework helps to account for this reality by advancing our ability to theorise displacement and (im)mobility. At the same time, the framework does not discount the importance of territorial control but complements it.

The framework we propose also helps us connect our insights to post-conflict and stable settings. Kit Rickard and Kristin M. Bakke (2021) find that more than 20 years following the Good Friday agreement, the ‘justice’ systems of paramilitaries remain in some corners of Northern Ireland in the form of punishment attacks. The persistence or emergence of these patterns is connected to civilians’ post-war choices: Egor Lazarev (2019) finds that Chechen women took more claims to Russian state judicial institutions from communities impacted by the war – in spite of Russia’s weak territorial presence. Even in non-civil war settings, governments leverage uneven coercive authority to gain social compliance. Rebecca Tapscott (2021, p. 5) describes ‘arbitrary’ governance as characterised by interventions of ‘[...] overwhelming and unaccountable violence at unpredictable moments’. The overall effect is a level of social control beyond the regime’s exclusive territorial control. Social control in the absence of territorial control also links to work on criminal groups’ governance in the shadow of state sovereignty, such as in Rio de Janeiro (Barnes 2022), or even as the result of state strength, which Gemma Dipoppa (2022) argues is the reason that the mafia was able to spread to Northern Italy in the 1960s: small firms needed pliant labourers who would not report on labour code violations, which the mafia could provide. Importantly, the mafia kept labourers in line because they were migrants from the south whose families could be credibly threatened by the mafia.

Our discussion of social control raises avenues for further research. Most importantly, why do armed groups opt for social or territorial control first, or why do they opt for social control or territorial control only? One expectation is that armed groups formulate aims and take decisions based on factors consistent with Kalyvas’s expectations about territorial control, namely geographic and military calculations. If an armed group has the relative capability to establish boundaries or frontlines, for example, they will prioritise territorial control in their quest for sovereignty. If, however, an armed group lacks the military capacity to establish such boundaries, or if the geography and population density make it exceedingly costly to do so, armed groups may prioritise social control (Rubin 2020). Corridors – where armed groups do not pursue social control – may be advantageous based on geographic conditions that are conducive to illicit activities. Finally, armed groups may be restricted to cultivating social networks where their relative military capacity is very low in comparison with their rival (Rupesinghe and Diall 2023).

Theorising about social control also allows scholars to integrate civilian agency and societal characteristics, which are likely to influence armed groups’ choices. For instance, a report on the Maghreb notes that ‘hierarchical Tuareg societies, where lineage and mobility’ are important, lend themselves well to vertical strategies of recruitment. ‘In other instances, chiefs in ideologically aligned villages in northern Mali, which already practiced hard-line

versions of Islam, actively sought to support jihadist groups by providing children and youth as tributes, further strengthening the ties between the two' (Bleck *et al.* 2018, p. 174).<sup>16</sup> Where armed groups can rely on such kinship and social ties, they have a considerable advantage to influence civilian behaviour without territorial control.

At the macro level, we could also ask whether certain civil war settings are more likely to lend themselves to prioritising social control over territory: under what conditions are wars fought over people rather than territory? We have some evidence that in non-secessionist wars or wars in which natural resources do not play a large role, armed group resources come from the population and not from the strategic or symbolic worth of territory (Toft 2014). A related question is whether pre-war settlement patterns, such as peripheries of sparse settlement, shape armed group strategies in terms of focus on territory or social control (Herbst 1996). More broadly, this discussion reminds us that not every armed group aims at territorial control to build a state similar to that of the incumbent (Gutiérrez 2022). Insurgents frequently aim at disrupting incumbent rule and its monopoly on violence to pursue political, economic or social change. This goes in line with works in African politics that highlight alternative ways of exercising power that do not conform with the idea of centralised authority over a fixed set of people in a given space (Schouten 2022). It also responds to calls to analyse 'ordering processes' (Waterman and Worrall 2020) that can take into account a much broader variety of armed group and civilian behaviour beyond pure coercion.

Though we used examples of civilian displacement and mobility to illustrate the utility of explicitly incorporating social control into models of armed group behaviour, the framework also has implications for other civil war dynamics. For instance, settings in which social control is a crucial resource for armed groups may produce distinct forms of armed group alliances and rivalries (Malejacq 2016). The sequence of prioritising social control or territorial control may also have an impact on the types of governance institutions armed groups establish. For example, Zachariah Mampilly and Megan A. Stewart (2021, p. 24–5) show how rebel-civilian social ties and civilian support contribute to more integrated forms of rebel governance that take into account both community leaders' and rebels' goals, while rebel groups taking over territory without such networks tend to establish more coercive governance institutions or those that co-opt local leaders.

Social control also draws attention to the political nature of attending to the displaced and the potential for ongoing conflicts and violence triggered by their resettlement and return (Schwartz 2019). Broadening the analysis of control in civil war to include social control draws attention to a larger share of armed group and civilian behaviour, including how armed groups govern mobility during civil wars, how they use violence to move people or to keep them in place, and how civilians evade these attempts.

## Notes

1. Rubin and Stewart (2022, p. 17) criticise the view that ‘territorial control is a prerequisite for sovereignty, and sovereignty (statehood) (...) a prerequisite for governance’. We agree that governance can occur without territorial control but maintain that (quasi-) statehood is linked to some form of territorial control.
2. In (Legal) Sociology, social control is defined as the opposite of coercive control, ‘the social organisation of a society which rests predominantly and essentially on force – the threat and the use of force’ (Janowitz 1975, p. 84). Social control refers to ‘the capacity of society to regulate itself according to desired principles and values’ (Janowitz 1975, p. 82). The society in question can be a primary group or a nation state, so for legal scholars, law is one form of social control – ‘government social control’ (Black 1976, p. 2).
3. This is in line with later thinking in sociology. Sociologists acknowledge that even non-coercive forms of control can have a repressive (coercive) component; for Barrington Moore, for example, social control involves an element of repression, whether conscious or unconscious (Janowitz 1975, p. 99). In fact, some sociologists consider social control as an ‘exercise of power’ and a ‘tool for social engineering’ (Meier 1982, p. 42), acknowledging an important role for elites in defining the norms they seek compliance for and enforcing them (Meier 1982, p. 44, 48). Our definition also departs from Migdal’s (1988, p. 22) as ‘the successful subordination of people’s own inclinations of social behaviour or behaviour sought by other social organisations in favour of the behaviour prescribed by [state] rules’. We incorporate the relational aspect element of this definition, but narrow it to focus on armed groups’ more specific aims.
4. Malthaner (2015) considers ‘support relationships’ the broader category and links ‘social control’ to an armed group’s symbolic forms of power and considers it as one possible expression of legitimacy for the group.
5. Of course, in practice, the pursuit of territorial and social control may be more simultaneous. For example, Teo Ballvé (2021, p. 7) suggests that territory is ‘[...] a spatialised political technology, a form of social control over a defined fragment of space’. However, we think our analytical disaggregation has important payoffs.
6. Slater and Kim (2015) describe strategies of ‘standoffish states’, which also follow similar calculations that we describe here, suggesting that this framework may apply more broadly beyond civil war settings.
7. McNamee (2023, p. 5) writes, ‘... settler [colonists] are simply migrants who partake in projects of territorial conquest’. He contrasts such colonisation with imperialism, which he defines as the acquisition of new territory.
8. Weiner and Teitelbaum (2001, p. 54) define demographic engineering as ‘the full range of government policies intended to affect the size, composition, distribution and growth rate of a population’, and considers ‘state policies to move or remove populations’ (p. 55) as an important subset.
9. Interview with alias ‘William’, Bogotá, Colombia, 6 August 2007.
10. Interview with former Renamo combatant, Nicoadala, Mozambique, 8 March 2012.
11. In his work coding different forms of strategic displacement across civil wars, Lichtenheld (2020) finds that cleansing is most common in conventional civil wars, or wars that are fought for territory across clear frontlines (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010). This finding suggests that the logic we propose here is plausible, because cleansing is associated with territorial control.



12. Kalyvas (2006, p. 29) brackets cases in which armed groups do not aim to govern a population, which include those that feature ethnic cleansing and genocide. But we believe this conflates macro-level war aims with the imperatives of establishing local sovereignty. Social control demands expulsion, relocation and repopulation in ways that systematically vary within wars, even those not driven by genocidal ideologies.
13. With territorial control as a scope condition in the early rebel governance literature (e.g., Mampilly 2011, Arjona 2016), it falls in this category of our model.
14. She also finds that armed groups that she labels territorial challengers 'tend to victimise civilians in areas to which many supporters of the territorial ruler flee, suggesting that armed groups currently not in control of a certain area punish civilians for siding with the opponent and spoil the relative stability in those areas' (Weber 2023, p. 3).
15. Restricting mobility and exit has been a primary concern for state-builders as well. Paul Frymer (2017) documents the obsession of the early US federal government with restricting settlement on the frontier in order to avoid conflict with Native Americans and other colonial powers. Steele *et al.* (2017) describe governance in early modern Japan, when peasants were forbidden to leave their villages. However, mass out-migration was a form of protest that peasants occasionally undertook, especially to protest against high tax rates.
16. We thank Siobhan O'Neil for bringing these examples to our attention.

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