Cross-Spectrum Similarities Between Violent Non-State Actors

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Introduction

Understanding armed non-state organizations is one of the most pressing concerns in today's security environment. Whether on the local, state, or international level, violent non-state actors as a whole represent one of the most troubling issues for national security practitioners, and the danger they pose is compounded by their nebulous and elusive natures. As John Robb, a theorist on the evolution of warfare and former special operations pilot, described in his testimony before the US Congress last year:

> The threat the US faces today is as dire as the darkest days of the Cold War. In fact, this threat may be even more dangerous because it is so insidious. The threat we face is a combination of global systemic threats … and the rapid emergence of violent non-state groups ...[1]

It is also a problem that continues to grow in scope. Terror, insurgent, militia, and criminal groups, equipped with readily available communication and travel technology, have shifted from regional to major strategic challenges. They have increased their "organizational effectiveness, their lethality, and their ability to operate on a truly worldwide scale."[2]

Further complicating the matter, contemporary researchers have recognized a growing nexus between various types of groups (whether analyzing insurgent groups in Iraq, terrorist groups like Al Qaeda or street in gangs in South America) and increasing similarities in how they operate. These similarities and their increased threat potential urges us to examine the follow-on questions: do deeper similarities exist between these groups and, if so, can the way we deal with one set of groups provide any lessons in dealing with another?

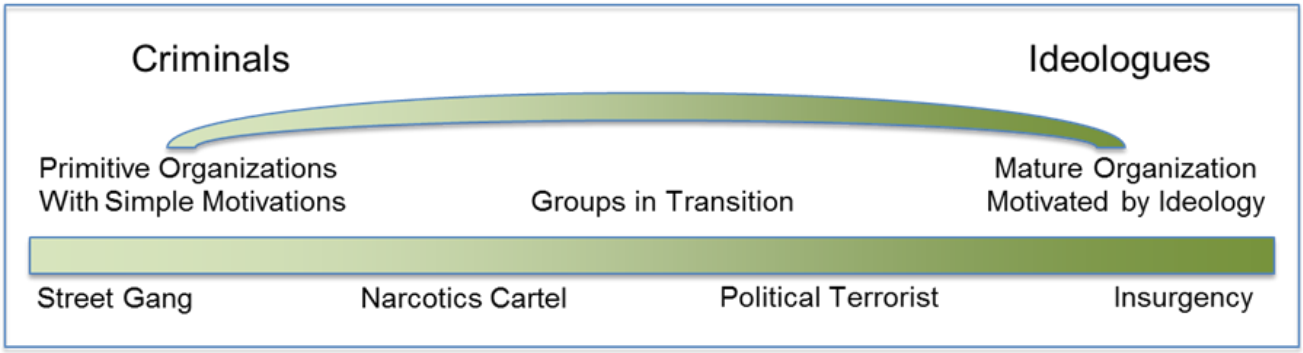
Overview

This article explores the possibility of deeper similarities between armed non-state groups. It attempts to move beyond top layer similarities (such as in methods, stated motivations or goals - all of which have been addressed elsewhere) and to discern similarities in more fundamental variables and characteristics in order to answer the question: What fundamental similarities exist between violent non-state actors? In the end it proposes that, while there are no universal variables or characteristics, many are exceedingly common.

The following analysis utilizes extensive research within one category of violent non-state actor, street gangs, and compares this to primary and secondary evidence regarding other violent non-state actors. Instead of searching for similarities in what they do, it investigates the likenesses in variables and characteristics at the individual, group and community levels. Most of this evidence is relatively recent and therefore primarily qualitative. There are, however, sections that utilize quantitative data where it is available.

The VNSA Continuum[1]

For purposes of this paper the continuum belowwas developed and will be referred to in the sections ahead:



[1] Robb, John. Congressional Testimony. House Armed Services Committee. 2 Apr 2009.

[2] Hanlon, Querine H. "Globalization and the Transformation of Armed Groups." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.

The Continuum

Traditionally, armed non-state groups have been distributed along a horizontal continuum. They are generally grouped by logical distinctions in:

1. Motivation[3]
2. Size
3. Organization
4. Function

Blurring of Lines

In more recent years international security researchers have noticed a blurring of the lines traditionally observed between VNSAs across the continuum. This blurring has been evident in motivation, size, organization and particularly function. What this may imply is deeper commonalities between these groups than had been considered before.

Observers are now finding that many distinctions previously made between VNSAs are "no longer very useful for discerning or assessing the security landscape."[4] Oehme describes the situation as thus:

> …terrorists and insurgents are resorting to organized crime … also opportunistically seeking out criminal networks when specialized support is needed... Conversely, violent criminal organizations have been known to employ operational approaches similar to terror networks to intimidate or gain concessions from provincial government officials…[5]

Groups that take one particular form are found assuming the functions of others such as insurgent groups robbing banks or criminal groups defending minority populations at risk.[6] For instance, IRA activities today primarily consist of local intimidation for economic or political purposes as well as the occasional spectacular bank robbery.[7] Political insurgents in Iraq frequently resort to kidnapping, embezzlement, oil smuggling, theft, fraud and extortion.[8] In the Philippines the Abu Sayyaf Group, a terrorist organizations in the southern islands, has conducted kidnappings, bank robberies and general looting activities.[9] As insurgencies have urbanized away from rural bases they have come to share a similar environment to urban criminal groups like street gangs. This environmental shift may be one reason for adapting techniques and operational methods.[10]

Blurring is not limited to insurgent or terrorist groups. Similar conclusions are being drawn about criminal organizations like gangs. As Max Manwaring, an expert in insurgencies and their relation to gangs, recognized:

> whether a gang is specifically a criminal or insurgent type organization is irrelevant. Its putative objective is to neutralize, control, or depose governments to ensure self-determined (nondemocratic) ends.[11]

Examples of this abound. Recently drug cartels in Juarez, Mexico, have been able to wrest control from the government. In one case the a cartel was able to remove the police chief, Roberto Orduña Cruz, by vowing to kill a police officer every 48 hours until he resigned.[12] They have also intimidated the mayor himself, threatening to decapitate him and his family unless he backed off.[13] Gangs and other criminal groups are challenging the "legitimacy of the state, particularly in regions where the culture of democracy is challenged by corruption and reinforced by the inability of political systems to function well enough to provide public goods."[14] They are acting as surrogates or alternative governments in these areas as well as infiltrating governmental and nongovernmental organizations to further their aims.[15]

Youth Aspect

A benefit of comparing gang studies to information regarding other VNSAs is their focus on the youth component. Studies have determined that gang-joining rates vary by age with the highest levels found in the teenage years.[16] This can be useful as the analysis drawn from here may be well suited to address the youth component of other VNSAs.

Youth involvement in VNSAs across the spectrum is often recognized as a critical component but is not always addressed or understood. Within most VNSAs it is usually the youthful component, at the bottom of the organization, that makes up the mass of its ranks and are most often the ones conducting the majority of the group's operations. This is illustrated by the vertical spectrum overlaid on the horizontal VNSA continuum.

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[3] Underwood, Peter T. "Pirates, Vikings, and Teutonic Knights." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.

[4] Oehme, Chester G. III. *Terrorists, Insurgents, and Crime – Growing Nexus?* Studies in Conflict and Terrorism. 31:1, 80-93. 2008.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hoyt, Timothy D. "Adapting to a Changing Environment: The Irish Republican Army as an Armed Group." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.

[7] Ibid., 55

[8] Oehme, 85

[9] Frake, Charles O. "Abu Sayyaf: Displays of Violence and the Proliferation of Contested Identities Among Philippine Muslims." American Anthropologist 100.1 (1998): 41-54.

[10] Hoffman, Frank G. "Neo-Classical Insurgency?" Parameters. Summer, 2007: 71-87.

[11] Manwaring, Max G. A Contemporary Challenge to State Sovereignty Gangs and Other Illicit Transnational Criminal Organizations in Central America, El Salvador, Mexico, Jamaica and Brazil. Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute. 2007.

[12] Lacey, Marc. "With Force, Mexican Drug Cartels Get Their Way." New York Times. 01 March 2009. Accessed 8 Mar 2009. (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/01/world/americas/01juarez.html?em)

[13] Ibid.

[14] Manwaring, 10

[15] Ibid.

[16] Klein, Malcom W. and Maxson, Cheryl L. Street Gang Patterns and Policies. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2006.

Age Spectrum Overlaid the VNSA Continuum

This point is evident in Afghanistan where youth play a visibly large role within terror and insurgent groups. Indeed, the very first US military member killed in the war on terror "was a Green Beret killed by a 14-year-old sniper."[17] On the release of a video showing a boy beheading a blindfolded man, Taliban commander Mullah Hayatullah Khan commented, "...We want to tell the non-Muslims that our youngsters are… Mujahadeens and… will be our Holy War commanders in the future."[18] Even Senior Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri first became an active member of a Jihadi cell at the age of 16.

In Iraq, with its myriad of active VNSA groups, youth also play a central role. Even in 2004, very early on, there were 107 juveniles classified as high-risk security threats held in the Abu Ghraib prison alone.[19] By 2007 some 800 juveniles, between the age of 11 and 16, were held in detainment facilities.[20] Foreign fighters flowing into Iraq were mainly young men.[21] As Zaki Chehab, a journalist who interviewed insurgents inside the Iraq resistance, recognized, "...Hundreds of disaffected young Arabs from every kind of background, whether Islamists or nationalists… wasted no time in volunteering."[22] He further noted that although weapons were available to all and most Iraqis had training, "those who actually carried out the attacks were young Islamists."[23] In traveling through Iraq, interviewing the insurgents Ghaith Abdul-ahad found that they all "dreamt of being part of the jihadi movement, of being mujahedeen … all those people are young – 16, 17, 20, 25, 30 maximum."[24]

The strong youth component is not limited to Islamic terrorism or insurgency movements. It is reflected in groups operating in different locations, populations and times. For example, the Red Brigades, an Italian terror organization that operated primarily during the 1970's, consisted primarily of youth. In one "typical attack, two youths on a motorcycle shot and wounded Giorgio Bohretti, a 53-year-old bank executive."[25] The importance of the youth aspect to VNSAs is difficult to overstate and the existing gang research may provide useful insight, lessons and perspective for those studying VNSAs elsewhere on the continuum.

Local Aspect

Street gang research also tends to focus on the local. While some gangs have more recently become extra-localized –or even globalized- organizations, they have traditionally been both active and prosecuted on the local level. This is an important asset if attempting to transfer lessons to international security challenges like terrorism and insurgencies, which, at their roots, are local issues that require addressing at that level.

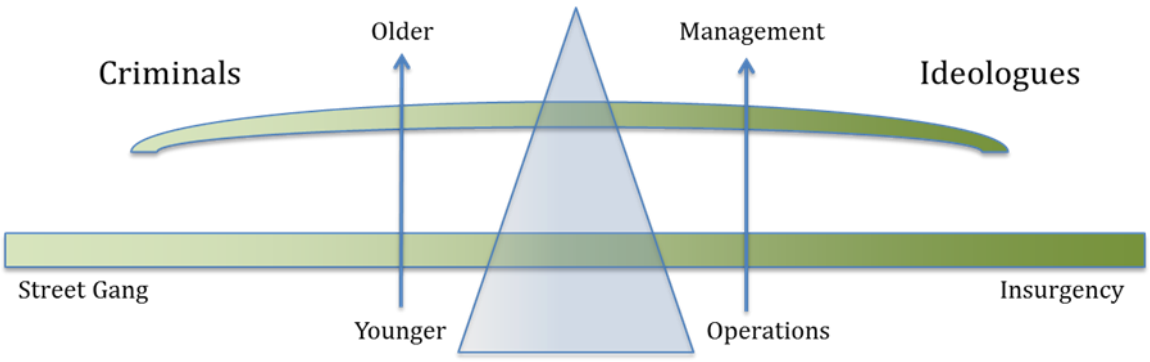
This local focus, even when a group's presence extends beyond a localized area, has recognized benefit when examining other VNSAs. In his testimony regarding the future of VNSAs before the US Congress, John Robb recommended that, "we should focus on the local."[26] He noted that in nearly all of the foreseeable future conflicts involving VNSAs the "ability to manage local conditions is paramount."[27] This is particularly important in today's context where VNSAs, whether operating in a city or across the globe, commonly use decentralized organizational structures that shift autonomy and initiative to local levels.[28]

In analyzing data compiled on the global Jihadi movement, Clint Watts, co-director of PJ Sage, found that city and nodal strategies were far more likely to succeed in disrupting the targeted groups.[29] He suggests:

> ... microscopically focusing on flashpoint cities and dense social network hubs rather than nations or regions … Western countries must look past international boundaries and focus on cities and hubs of radicalization.[30]

Looking at the decades of available gang research, with a long history of focusing on the local, may offer new perspectives and tools with which to approach other VNSAs.

[17] Singer, Peter W. "Children on the Battlefield: The Breakdown of Moral Norms." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.
[18] Reuters, "Taliban video of boy executioner causes anger." 26 April, 2007.
[19] Singer, 362
[20] Ibid.
[21] Felter, Joseph and Fishman, Brian. Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records. New York. Combating Terrorism Center. 2008.
[22] Chehab, Zaki. Inside the Resistance. New York. Nation Books. 2006.
[23] Ibid., 18
[24] Abdul-ahad, Ghaith. Interview. Frontline. Public Broadcasting Corporation. Aug 2005. Accessed 21 Jan 2009. (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/insurgency/interviews/abdulahad.html)
[25] Smith, Paul J. "The Italian Red Brigades (1969-1984): Political Revolution and Threats to the State." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008
[26] Robb
[27] Ibid.
[28] Hanlon, 119
[29] Watts, Clint. Beyond Iraq & Afghanistan: What Foreign Fighter Data Reveals About the Future of Terrorism. PJ Sage. 2008
[30] Ibid., 6



Age Spectrum Overlaid the VNSA Continuum

Commonalities

This section addresses common fundamental variables, risk factors and characteristics between gangs and other VNSAs. It is divided into three sections, each addressing a different level of analysis: individual, group and community.

The first thing to note is that it moves beyond simple explanations of stated grievances to find common underlying factors. In examining 1,043 civil-war ex-combatants, Macartan Humphrys, a Columbia University professor and expert in civil war, found that "empirical results challenge standard interpretations of grievance-based accounts of participation."[1] While a group's stated grievances can tell an analyst much, in forming policy decisions there may be utility in looking beyond these.

The second item to note of is that these variables make a complex web of influence. They vary in appearance across different cases. Due to contextual differences, such as culture and location, some are found in a majority of cases studied while others may show up in only a few. Further, these variables often interact with each other increasing their overall influence.

Individual Level Factors

At their lowest level terror attacks and insurgent operations are a matter of individual choice. Each terrorist or insurgent chooses to join the group and ultimately to pull the trigger or detonate an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). As anthropologist Charles Frake states, "Current violence, in the mountains of Bosnia, the streets of New York, the pubs of Belfast, the subways of Tokyo, and the islands of the Philippines, is, in the situation and moment of occurrence, an act of individuals with individual motives and intent."[2] What follows is an analysis of some of the factors that influence the motives and intent of those individuals who choose to participate in violent non-state groups.

Previous Criminal Acts

It may be obvious, but nonetheless useful, to note that prior illegal activity may identify those who are more susceptible to recruitment into what are essentially criminal organizations, whether a street gang, insurgent or terrorist group. A study on gangs produced for the Canadian government summarizes a vast collection of gang studies when stating that, "researchers have indicated that prior acts of delinquency were significantly correlated with a youth's decision to join a gang."[3]

Past illegal activity indicates an attitude or outlook that finds it less difficult to cross legal or moral boundaries. A majority of gang studies that focus on individual variables "find that 'youth attitudes toward delinquent behavior' is a risk factor.[4] A clear terrorist or insurgent example of this factor was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former leader of al-Qaedai's Iraq-based insurgent organization. He was first arrested and jailed not for bombings or kidnappings, but for petty crimes as a youth in Jordan.[5]

This lack of moral or legal boundaries may also partially explain how some VNSAs can easily move between criminal acts like robbery and kidnapping for ransom to political violence like terror or insurgent attacks. As described in the introduction, VNSAs are sliding back and forth on the horizontal spectrum and often fitting into more than one category simultaneously. If individuals are able to cross moral and legal boundaries for one particular reason then perhaps it is easier to cross them for others, political or otherwise.

Exposure to Turmoil

An individual's exposure to traumatic events, particularly where violence is involved, also appears to be a somewhat common factor shared by VNSAs across

1. [1] Humphreys, Macartan and Weinstein, Jeremy M. "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War." The American Journal of Political Science 52.2 (2008): 436-455.

[2] Frake, 41

[3] Lafontaine, Tania; Ferguson, Myles and Wormith J. Stephen. Street Gangs: A review of the Empirical Literature on Community and Corrections-Based Prevention, Intervention and Suppression Strategies. Paper prepared for the Canadian Government. June 2005.

[4] Klein, 148

[5] Chehab, 49

the spectrum. Locations where much of VNSA activity is concentrated provide countless violent situations to influence potential recruits. Personal experiences with extreme violence, whether in South Central Los Angeles, Palestine or Iraq can influence individuals' life choices and provide justification for and normalization of violent activities.

Gang and terror group studies appear to agree on this point, many of which note that those who were exposed to violence and emotional distress in their childhood were more likely to become involved.[6] Klein and Maxson noted that, generally speaking, there were a higher concentration of youth who experienced a series of negative life events in gangs.[7] Kellerhals, in researching terrorist groups, found that:

> Individuals who endure trauma may undergo *dissociation*, or a state of already being dead. This type of mental freezing… can lead the individual to become unemotional about killing another human being. Those generations who see or experience war, torture and other horrors eventually normalize violent acts in their minds... These people find it much easier to become a terrorist or a suicide bomber.[8]

Identity

Seeking to build or find one's identity is a common and strong factor for those joining VNSAs. This is particularly true for younger individuals and for those who feel detached from their ethnic, cultural or other bases for identity. The Canadian gang study notes that "gang members tended to be persons with identity problems".[9] Specifically cited in multiple gang studies were those who felt weak attachments to their ethnic group or a lack of cultural identity.[10]

Similar to gang membership, issues of identity are commonly found within membership of other VNSAs. As Jessica Stern, Harvard's noted expert on terrorists and militants, stated in a recent interview, "There's a strong feeling of confused identity."[11] Abubakar Janjalani, the principal founder of the Philippine terrorist organization Abu Sayyef Group (ASG) was himself born into a split Muslim-Christian family. In growing ASG, Janjalani "tapped into a large pool of disaffected Muslims… torn from their ethnic roots during the preceding decades."[12] As Juergensmeyer found in researching terror groups, "to live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated…"[13]

Defining or redefining individual identity is not always an issue of ethnicity or religious background. The Red Brigades would test potential recruits to ensure they were capable of shedding their old identities and any connection to it, family, friends or otherwise.[14]

Further, for some VNSA members, the motivating force behind the issue of identity may be simpler than a complex detachment from ethnic of cultural roots. While researching The Real IRA and The Continuity IRA, Morton Cole, a UK based journalist, found that many of the youth involved with the resurgence of violence during 2009 wanted to "identify with something that is rebellious."[15] Fahmi Salem Said Al Sani, a Yemeni who travelled to the Al Farouq Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan during 2001, remarked that he didn't go to "fight anyone" but because he "felt it was important in coming of age."[16]

The motivation behind an individual's issues of identity may be tied to weak ethnic or cultural foundations, or to something as simple as the urge of youth toward rebelliousness and proving maturity. Either way, an individual's sense of identity and how a group may build or shape that are crucial to youth development and can play a significant role in motivating membership in VNSAs.[17] At the simplest level, VNSA activity is based on individuals seeking to satisfy questions of identity, status, need for belonging, and perceived protection, and not to commit crimes.[18]

Security

Some individuals are drawn to membership in armed groups for the perception of security that it can provide. Among the many individual factors identified in gang research, "safety and protection" often reaches the top of the list.[19] One study that engaged St Louis gangs, for example, showed that members selected protection more often (54%) than any other reason for joining.[20] Follow-up questions from other studies revealed that gang members often felt threatened and joined to seek physical protection, find safety and to protect their neighborhoods.[21]

The logical question that follows identifying "the need for protection" as a factor is: protection from what? The answer to this question can be the same for insurgent and gang member: protection from rival groups. Rival street gang violence is responsible for

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[6] Lafontaine, 31
[7] Klein, 148
[8] Kellerhals, Merie D. Jr. "Profile of a Suicide Terrorist Defies Common Stereotypes." Americe.gov
[9] Lafontaine, 31
[10] Ibid., 31 and 34
[11] Stern, Jessica. Panel discussant. "The Making of a Terrorist." Talk of the Nation. Hosted by Neal Conan. 18 Jul 2005.
[12] Frake, 48
[13] Meilahn, Kathleen. "The Strategic Landscape: Avoiding Future Generations of Violent Extremists." Strategic Insights. July 2008.
[14] Smith, 18
[15] Cole, Morton. "Real IRA, Real Life." The Independent Mar. 2009. Accessed 16 Apr. 2009. (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/real-ira-real-life-1645360.html)
[16] Wittes, Benjamin. The Current Detainee Population of Guantanamo: An Empirical Study. Washington D.C. Brookings Institution. 2008. Accessed 04 Jan 2009. (http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Files/rc/reports/2008/1216_detainees_wittes/1216_detainees_wittes.pdf)
[17] Maggio, Edward J. "The Threat of Armed Street Gangs in America." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.
[18] Klein, 8
[19] Lafontaine, 31
[20] Klein, 157
[21] Ibid.

hundreds of deaths in the US annually. In Los Angeles in 1987, for instance, members of gangs were held responsible for 205 deaths.[22]

This targeting of "enemy" individuals and communities, and the insecurity it produces, is often mirrored in civil war or insurgent situations. On a far larger scale, nearly 1,400 Iraqi civilians were murdered in targeted killings in Baghdad during May of 2006.[23] Sectarian based violence has torn apart much of Iraq and produced innumerable localized insurgent groups. In addition to fighting the coalition, these groups are set up to defend against targeted sectarian attacks. Reactionary groups "often form in response to threats to their communities … focus on the traditional military task of protecting the population."[24]

Iraq is a stark example but not the only one. In Sierra Leone VNSAs vying for power fueled a particularly bloody conflict. Fighters within civil-warring groups generally believe that they are safer inside a fighting faction than outside of it.[25] Humphreys, who has researched this angle of the conflict extensively, found that:

> The relationship between personal security and the decision to join a rebellion is strongly significant … even after controlling for a range of other factors …The possibility of improving one's personal security, it appears, provides an important motivation for joining a faction ...[26]

VNSAs persist because they satisfy particular needs of their members. Among the more prominent is the perceived protection membership provides from rival groups.[27]

Free Time

VNSA members often possess excess leisure time and have few meaningful activities to occupy it with. The previously mentioned Canadian study noticed that research often found that gang members reported a greater amount of unstructured time spent with their peers.[28] Several gang studies go on to identify seeking "excitement" as a reason for membership.[29] Membership offers gratification to individuals with a need for engaging activities and who possess excess free time.

This factor also appears in detainee data from Guantanamo and records on foreign fighters captured from insurgents in Iraq. The modern Sunni mujahid who volunteers to fight as a terrorist or insurgent "has time on his hands and a lack of purpose, making him more susceptible to radicalization and giving him enough free time to travel in support of jihad."[30] Tales of "Jihadi adventure" in foreign lands from returning fighters can be influential to youth under the influence of this factor. In interviews with Jared Cohen, young Palestinian militants commented, "What choice do we have? They try to create special programs for us to experience life outside the camps, but we still face so many problems… we have no entertainment."[31] This lack of meaningful activity or purpose, in particular, links directly into the next common factor between VNSA members: desire for a purpose in life.

Purpose Seeking

Gang and insurgent/terror group members share the desire for a purpose to their lives that membership in these groups appears to offer. Gang research describes the typical gang member as someone who had lower feelings of purpose in life.[32] Whereas the typical gang member might find purpose in protecting his neighborhood, modern Jihadis are commonly influenced by the idea of "devotion to his faith and community.[33]

Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, an Iraqi reporter who has interviewed countless insurgents, recounts his conversation with a group of foreign fighters in Northern Iraq:

> They dreamt of being part of the jihadi movement, of being mujahideen, and Iraq provided them with the opportunity to fulfill this dream, ...to send people, send money, create the ideological cause… But for those young men, ... they have this romantic dream of Osama bin Laden, of mujahideen, of Afghanistan, and they wanted to fulfill these dreams in Fallujah and Iraq.[34]

Jared Cohen found similar desires and dreams in his discussions with young Lebanese Fatah militants. One of the groups he spoke with commented that, "inside here we are somebody… We want to contribute to society… At least if we fight, we feel as though we belong to something that is trying to bring about change.[35]

It is not only Jihadis and gangsters that are motivated by a need for purpose in life. The Italian Red Brigades provide another example. The Red Brigades was originally commanded by Renato Curcio and his wife Margherita Cagol, who were trained hotel bookkeepers that found their mundane lives unappealing.[36] They found greater purpose in creating a movement to

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[22] Reinhold, Robert. "Gang Violence Shocks Los Angeles." New York Times. 08 Feb 2008. Accessed 04 Jan 2009. (http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/08/us/gang-violence-shocks-los-angeles.html)

[23] Borger, Julian and Howard, Michael. "Baghdad has Bloodiest Month as 1,400 targeted Killings Add to Toll." The Gaurdian Jun. 2006. Accessed 20 Apr. 2009. (http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/jun/07/iraq.iraqtimeline)

[24] Hammes, T. X. "Armed Groups: Changing the Rules." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.

[25] Humphreys, 442

[26] Ibid., 449

[27] Klein, 165

[28] Lafontaine, 30

[29] Ibid., 34

[30] Watts, 2

[31] Cohen, Jared. Children of Jihad. New York. Gotham. 2008.

[32] Lafontaine, 31

[33] Watts, 8

[34] Abdul-Ahad

[35] Cohen, 172

[36] Smith, 16

facilitate the social and political changes that they believed were inevitable.[37]

Status, Respect and Power

Youth are often motivated by the idea of wielding power over others and earning respect and status within their social group. One of life's major motivators "on occasion not even second to survival, is the need to be somebody."[38] Studies have consistently identified "status and respect" as the top reason for gang membership.[39] Additionally, Gordon found that "status deprivation can be a cause of delinquency.[40]

A similar desire for power, status and respect may influence insurgent and terrorist group recruits as well. In researching ASG in the Philippines, Frake found that the need to be "somebody" was only satisfied through recognition from one's fellows.[41] Writing on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Mary Anne Weaver, a noted journalist who has covered militant Islam extensively, remarked that there was "a cachet involved in fighting the jihad."[42] After fighting in Afghanistan, Zarqawi discovered that the community that had previously ignored him had now accorded him a high social position and respect. As with many VNSA members, maintaining and increasing social position became an important motivating factor for Zarqawi's future activities. To help understand this, Singer asks us to:

> Imagine the temptation you might have if a group of older boys wearing natty uniforms and cool sunglasses were to show up at your school and force all the teachers to bow down to show who is "really in charge." They then invite you to join them, with the promise that you too can wield such influence.[43]

Family and Peer Factors

In addition to the individual's search for private meaning and social respect, there is the semi-public influence of one's family and friends. Modern gang literature reveals that peer and family-related factors are highly influential in gang participation and a weak family foundation is a significant indicator of participation.[44] Gordon found that "within delinquents' families, marital relations were poorer, there was less family cohesion, less affection shown… by both parents."[45] As a result, the sons felt weaker emotional ties to their parents and had a lower estimate of his parents' concern for their welfare.[46]

Although the evidence is not as plentiful as in gang research, weak family systems do appear to be a factor for membership to insurgent or terror groups. A group of more than 200 Saudi sociologists, who gathered in Riyadh in 2005 to discuss terrorism, concluded that "an unhappy home is the cause of youths going astray and eventually taking to terrorist activities."[47] One of the sociologists pointed out that broken homes are bereft of understanding or communication and that "such a family environment leads to frustration, which eventually leads the youth to be misfits in society who resort to nefarious activities."[48]

It is not only lack of family involvement that encourages VNSA membership; families and friends can also actively encourage membership through their own affiliations. Family or peer connections to gangs can provide the quick track to membership, which is reflected in the findings of multiple gang studies and in the experience of insurgents/terrorists.[49]

A 2003 study of Rochester gang members found that more than half indicated that having friends or family in the gang was the *primary* reason they joined.[50] Studies conducted by Howell and Lahey found that previous association with antisocial peers was a significant contributor to gang membership.[51] Klein, with further analysis on this variable, notes that friend relations is not only a risk factor for gang joining, but they can influence of amplify other risk factors as well.[52]

For potential terrorists or insurgents family members and friends provide the social pressure and reinforcement of political or religious justifications for violence.[53] Analysis of the Sinjar Records, a foreign-insurgent registry in Iraq, shows that friendships played a key role in recruitment.[54] Many of the fighters crossed into Iraq with hometown friends, suggesting that al-Qaida targeted existing groups of friends.[55] Interviews with Guantanamo detainees suggests a similar pattern for terrorists and insurgents captured in Afghanistan. The data indicates that returning fighters influenced groups of friends to join them and that the ones that did so travelled together, presumably reinforcing each other's decision.[56]

Group Level Structure and Processes Factors

Studying VNSAs at the group level explains the rationale for their operational motivations and

[37] Ibid., 17
[38] Frake, 41
[39] Lafontaine, 34
[40] Gordon, Robert A. "Social Level, Social Disability, and Gang Interaction." The American Journal of Sociology 73.1 (1967): 42-62.
[41] Frake, 41
[42] Weaver, Mary Anne. "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." The Atlantic. Jul 2006. Accessed 22 Feb 2009. (http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200607/zarqawi/2)
[43] Singer, 363
[44] Klein, 148
[45] Gordon, 50
[46] Ibid.
[47] Rasooldeen, Mohammed. "Broken Homes Blamed for Turning Youth to Terrorism." Arab News. 24 Mar 2005. Accessed 13 Dec 2008. (http://www.arabnews.com/services/print/print.asp?artid=60962&d=24…Broken%20Homes%20Blamed%20for%20Turning%20Youth%20to%20Terrorism)
[48] Ibid.
[49] Lafontaine, 34
[50] Klein, 157
[51] Lafontaine, 30
[52] Klein, 147
[53] Watts, 8
[54] Felter
[55] Ibid., 28
[56] Watts, 2

procedures and can also expose opportunities for effective counter-VNSA strategies.

Image, Media and Recruitment

A VNSA's image is paramount to its continued existence and growth. It is the group's image that addresses and exploits the individual's psychological needs: status, respect, power, identity, purpose and perception of security. The image is often communicated via readily accessible mass media such as the internet, music, or television or even by word of mouth from local veterans.

Image building and recognition are essential to the recruiting process. Gang imagery distributed through the popular media (movies, clothing styles, music, …) "seems to have more influence on local gang activity" than movement of actual gang members.[57] Once spread into the popular youth culture, containment of a gang's image has proven difficult. Even the Saudi Arabian government could not prevent Sunni-led Islamic militant groups from crossing into Iraq once the movement was popularized among Saudi youth.[58]

The internet is a vital medium in VNSA image campaigns, whether terrorist, insurgent or domestic street gang. Many of America's most notorious gangs have become web-savvy, "showcasing illegal exploits, making threats, and honoring killed and jailed members.[59] This seems a direct parallel to insurgent and terror websites which showcase videos of their violent acts with the logo of the group claiming responsibility, post audio or video clips of threatening speeches by leaders, and honor killed and captured members.[60]

Some particularly marketing-savvy VNSA groups have established "lifestyle" publications that promote the group's activities and interests to aspiring members and the curious public. The January 2009 issue of Sada al-Malahim, an online magazine published by Al-Qaeda in Yemen, contained "a word from sheik Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri", an article on Al-Tayammum and life in prison, and the story of "The Lion of Jawf: Amir Huraydan" among others.[61] An Urdu language online magazine published by the militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad and targeted for the pre-teen demographic, suggests that militants assume greater social status than doctors or engineers.[62]

Public media attention, even when negative, is also central to building a VNSA's image. Nightly newscasts that detail gang violence often identify groups by name, publicize the group's activity and help create an image of power and legitimacy. Terrorists, gangs and other VNSAs rely on this media amplification to achieve maximum psychological effect and thus affirm the power of the organization. These legitimate newscasts can spread terror among their targets, and affirmation of success among their sympathizers, sources of funding, and potential recruits.[63]

For example, a March 2006 story produced by the Oakland California CBS affiliate told the "inside story" of the Norteno versus Soreno gang wars.[64] The broadcast pushed the previously-localized gangs into community consciousness and caused generalized fear of the escalating violence. The Abu Sayyef Group, a Philippine terrorist organization, received similar publicity during its naissance when the *International Herald Tribune* featured a story on the group. The article was appointed with a "pagewide photo, obviously staged, of prototypic terrorists trying to look grim… while brandishing a threatening variety of weapons."[65] The headline read: "Islamic Rebels Stun Manila with Their Ferocity."[66]

In addition to mass media, both legitimate and propagandist, there is also a word of mouth element to VNSA image building that plays a central role. Although a community might respond as a whole to mass media, individual recruits are influenced by real-life examples of local gang members who have attained social position and can regale an audience with their exploits. The New York chapter of the Bloods street gang exploited this by organizing meet-and-greet mixers between current members and potential recruits.[67] Likewise, both the Sinjar Records and data on the Guantanamo detainees indicate that Al Qaeda deploys veteran fighters to return to their hometowns as recruiters.[68]

Oppositional Culture

Many VNSAs exhibit a group culture based on opposition, whether to official authority, rival VNSA group or some other perceived threat to its ascendancy. This oppositional culture establishes a perceived social purpose, of being part of a society of "us versus them struggling to exist in an unfriendly and unforgiving environment.[69] As sociologist Robert Gordon recognized:

> The group interaction brought about by the demands of an external environment for solutions to instrumental problems promotes positive sentiments between members. From these statements it would follow that if a group lacked a

[57] Klein, 57
[58] Chehab, 182
[59] Glazer, Andrew. "Authorities Say Gangs Using Internet." The Washington Post Jul. 2006. Accessed 12 Dec. 2008. (http://www.washington post.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/06/AR2006070600886.html)
[60] Chehab, 60
[61] Hegghammer, Thomas. "New Issue of Sada al-Malahim." Jihadica. 2009. Accessed 19 Jan. 2009. (http://www.jihadica.com/new-issue-of-sada-al-malahim)
[62] Siddique, Qandeel. "Child Martyrs." Jihadica. 11 Mar 2009. Accessed 11 Mar 2009. (http://www.jihadica.com/child-martyrs)
[63] Meilahn
[64] Vasquez, Joe "Oakland Murders." CBS 5 Evening News. Mar 2006. Accessed 22 Feb 2009. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IrxR_xOKs4)
[65] Frake, 41
[66] Ibid.
[67] Conte, Michaelangelo. "Weehawken Police Interrupt Suspected Gang Recruitment Meeting and Walk Away with 'Valuable' Notebook." The Jersey Journal Nov. 2008. Accessed 14 Apr. 2009. (http://www.nj.com/hudson/index.ssf/2008/11/wehawken_police_interrupt_susp.html)
[68] Felter, 28; Watts, 2
[69] Maggio, 190

> task, purpose, or mission as a result of not being integrated into a demanding external system … then it would fail to generate a major part of the rewards and sentiments that its members might expect to gain from it.[70]

Street gangs provide access to and legitimization of oppositional attitudes and behaviors.[71] This culture harnesses the individual's resentment of society's institutions such as the police, schools, or discriminatory employers.[72] In his studies of urban street gangs, Venkatesh found a common ideology regarding "the authorities as wholly or partially hostile or as unappreciative of the things which really matter."[73]

The same can be said about other VNSAs across the horizontal spectrum. Insurgent groups are, by their very definition, founded on opposition to existing power structures. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi emphasized his group's oppositional culture by describing the Iraqi government and its security forces as composed of "infidels".[74] The Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) rejected not just the Algerian government but also much of Algerian society as kuffar (apostates).[75] This opposition can be based on deep historical roots. As Frake notes:

> During the course of southern Philippines history, ethnic, religious, political, modernistic, and religionistic strata of identity formation, together with outlaw outcroppings in each stratum, shape the fault lines of divisiveness along which violent conflict threatens to erupt.[76]

Further, counter-VNSA actions by domestic or international institutions can help build and tighten this cultural foundation. As Lien discovered of Oslo based gangs, "the war on gangs justifies the warring gang."[77] Klein, in his review of gang research in the US observed that "each rejection of the gang merely reinforces its cohesiveness and its dependence upon itself.[78] The US Army's counterinsurgency filed Manual also recognizes this same point about insurgencies.[79]

This oppositional culture factor is often based on an idea of injustice and victimization. VNSA members conceive ideas of compassion, love and sacrifice based on self-perceptions as a victim of society's oppression, racism, inequality or suppression.[80] Gang experts Malcolm Klein and Cheryl Maxson found that the perception of injustice and victimization is necessary in order to justify a gang member's acts of violence or other criminal activity. This sentiment is illustrated in the words of Mohammed Sadiq Khan, recorded before taking part in the 2005 London bombings:

> Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world, and your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters.[81]

Terror groups like Al Qaeda feed on local or larger community grievances.[82] With this justification a VNSA member's actions can be seen as justified, selfless and heroic and victims can be seen as complicit enemies.[83] As Zarqawi stated about members of Iraq's security forces, "those who cooperate with the Americans are infidels… and they deserve to be killed."[84]

The legitimate media can again provide a buttress for VNSA movements. International broadcast of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, videos of Israeli attacks on Palestinian camps or domestic police abuse support the VNSA's rationale for their image as victim-crusaders against an unjust Establishment. In addition to garnering more recruits, these images may also serve to demoralize the general public in official prosecution of VNSAs.

Amplification of Delinquent Behavior

Exhaustive sociological research on group behaviors indicates the behavior of an individual will alter in a group setting. In the case of VNSAs across the spectrum the group process serves to amplify an individual's propensity to commit acts of violence or delinquency. This is especially well-documented within gang studies.

In his research on normative features of gang violence, Decker found that gang violence is at least partially "an outgrowth of a collective process."[85] The *social facilitation model* suggests that gang members' delinquent profiles are similar to non-gang members in the community before they join, and "it is the gang's group processes… that elevate criminal activity."[86] As Gordon notes in his studies, "such a … process may be capable of involving in serious delinquency boys who suffer from milder degrees of social disability, but in whom severe pathology seems absent.[87]

These processes are at work within other VNSA groups as well. Profiles of terrorists or insurgents often reveal a contrast between pre- and post-membership activities in regard to violence or criminality. Even the most seemingly solitary actors, suicide bombers, do not

[70] Gordon, 58
[71] Klein, 158
[72] Ibid., 206 - 207
[73] Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. "The Social Organization of Street Gang Activity in an Urban Ghetto." The American Journal of Sociology. 103.1. 1997: 82-111.
[74] Chehab, 56
[75] Byman, Daniel. "Talking With Insurgents: A Guide for the Perplexed." The Washington Quarterly 32.2 (2009): 125-137.
[76] Frake, 51
[77] Klein, 206 - 207
[78] Ibid.
[79] United States Department of the Army. The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual. Chicago. Chicago University Press. 2007.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Khan, Mohammed Sadiq. Videotaped Speech. 1 September 2003. Accessed 4 Jan. 2009. (http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/144/835.htm)
[82] Army, 8
[83] Klein, 206 - 207
[84] Chehab, 56
[85] Decker. "Collective and Normative Features of Gang Violence." Justice Quarterly 13.2 (1996): 243-264.
[86] Klein, 75
[87] Gordon, 62

operate alone.[88] Prospective bombers and other potential VNSA members follow kin and friends into their organizations.[89] These organizations provide emotional encouragement, financial and religious incentive and logistical support to suicide bombers at every step from their induction into the VNSA to their ultimate act. It is by nature a group activity aimed to amplify an individual's ability to commit acts they would have otherwise avoided.

Studies on gang violence amplification reveal even more about the process and its effectiveness. One controlled study of violence amplification in Rochester gangs, showed that "group-induced crime amplification took place at high rates regardless of the character of the gang neighborhood."[90] This might explain similar observations of the amplification factor within other VNSAs with diverse membership and locales. Further, this amplification appears to be self-reinforcing. With increased criminal activity comes a corresponding boost in group cohesion which itself leads to greater crime involvement and increased resistance to official efforts.[91]

Structure and Leadership

VNSAs across the spectrum are often characterized by loose leadership and decentralized organization. The majority of VNSAs, whether street gang, terror or insurgent group are composed of small loosely-affiliated and semi-autonomous cells. Although there are notable exceptions in groups that maintain greater cohesion and clear hierarchy, this, particularly with contemporary VNSAs, is a smaller fraction.

Street gangs do not generally fit a standard rigid hierarchy. Decker, in his study on collective and normative features of gang violence, found that violence and particularly retaliatory violence was an outgrowth that reflected a loose organizational structure and diffuse goals.[92] Klein and Maxson found while compiling gang research, that street gangs are almost always "more a loose collection of cliques or networks than a single, coherent whole."[93]

Insurgent groups also defy traditional organization and classification.[94] In Afghanistan, for instance, the insurgency is made up of Taliban members, Hezb-i-Islami, the Jalaluddin Haqqani network, as well as local tribes and criminal networks.[95] Each of these groups breaks further down into loosely connected subgroups and clans. Although the diffuse nature allows widespread geographical and social influence, it also subjects VNSAs to the inefficiencies of divergent internal factions and aims.[96]

In Iraq, organizations like Hamas, Salah ad-Din and 20th Revolutionary Brigades have active groups in multiple cities. Zaka Al-Din Abd Al Fatah Suliman, an insurgent tasked with beheading Iraqi national guardsmen, for instance, claimed to be part of a small group headed by Ahmad Ibrahim, which was in turn affiliated with the "Liberation Army".[97] These groups can be classified as affiliates rather than a single cohesive organization. By sharing a popularized brand name, all diffuse activities can be credited to affiliates, increasing their prestige as a whole and attracting publicity and financial support. This does not, however, guarantee uniformity in agenda as various affiliates struggle for ascendency within the larger VNSA. As Curry states, "today's small wars are a 'fur ball' of enabled groups vying for influence." [98]

This amorphous organizational structure is reflected in a loose form of leadership for most VNSAs. For gangs, leadership is generally ephemeral and turnover is high.[99] Group actions are determined more by the group itself and local context than by any particular individual. This is also typical of insurgent groups who must quickly react to and exploit changes in the local social or political contexts. Leadership for modern terror groups reflect this as well where:

> there is no single, central leadership, command, or headquarters … Decision-making and operations are decentralized, allowing for local initiative and autonomy. Thus the design may sometimes appear acephalous (headless), and at other times polycephalous (Hydra-headed).[100]

Community Level Factors

Variables found at the community level are some of the more influential to creation of and participation in VNSAs, and interact heavily with those at the individual and group levels of analysis. As Klein and Maxson found, "the stability of 'ganging' probably lies more in the characteristics of the particular community than in the particular group of young people who comprise the gang."[101]

[88] Hoffman, Bruce. "The Logic of Suicide Terrorism." The Atlantic Jun. 2003. Accessed 10 Sep. 2008. (http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200306/hoffman)
[89] Kellerhalls
[90] Klein, 163
[91] Ibid., 196
[92] Decker, 263
[93] Klein, 195
[94] Army, 100
[95] Jones, Seth G. Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Santa Monica: Rand, 2008.
[96] Curry, Peter E. "Small Wars are Local: Debunking Current Assumptions About Countering Small Armed Groups." Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency. Ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. Washington D.C. US Department of the Navy. 2008.
[97] Suliman, Zaka Al-Din Abd Al-Fatah. Videotaped Interview. 31 Mar 2005. Accessed 25 Jan 2009. (http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/144/630.htm)
[98] Curry, 151
[99] Klein, 164
[100] Arquilla, John; Ronfeldt, David; and Zanini, Michele. Networks, Netwar, and Information-Age Terrorism." Countering the New Terrorism. Santa Monica: Rand. 1999.
[101] Klein, 189

Lack of Opportunity

Communities that possess limited or no economic, social or recreational opportunities are particularly susceptible to VNSA development.[102] Lack of employment is a particularly influential variable. Without work potential members have ample free-time (an important individual factor). It also presents an economic motivation to participation in VNSAs. For street gang members the quick and easy income crime provides is attractive. In Iraq, the draw for many insurgents was the promise of pay for each particular act of violence. Further, VNSAs fulfill many social needs such as purpose and status which have been traditionally met by legitimate employment.

Gang research has clearly connected this factor to gang emergence and participation. Klein and Maxson find that gangs are particularly common in areas with "declines in the number of jobs in wholesale, retail, and manufacturing trades." Entry-level positions in these industries typically employ emerging youth.[103] Jackson, Wells and Weisheit's studies on gang emergence highlight economic transitions and disadvantage.[104] Maggio also found that:

> Regardless of race, gangs thrive when certain conditions in a community are present. An area of the nation with continuous poverty, …and decreased social opportunities …can raise the potential for street gangs to emerge.[105]

Lack of opportunity within a community influences the establishment and sustainment of other VNSAs. Evidence from interviews and recovered insurgent records indicates that "local, grass roots recruitment efforts centered in areas that have… limited employment opportunities."[106] In his extensive interviews with Iraqi insurgents Chehab found that higher unemployment "further inflamed" the situation.[107] In discussions with Palestinian militants in Lebanon, Cohen was continually told about the lack of opportunities present in the camps.[108] As one in particular stated:

> We can study and some of us even study outside of the camp, but for what? We can't work, we can't find jobs; we get nothing for our hard work. We feel depressed because we cannot have the opportunity for success even if we try…[109]

In the Philippines, ASG founder Abubakar Janjalani specifically targeted the vast pool of young unemployed and disaffected Muslims.[110] Regardless of location, the typical mujahid is "likely unemployed or a student (which usually amounts to the same thing)."[111]

Social Foundation

There are two ways a community's social foundation can allow and even facilitate VNSA emergence and growth: through a weak or open social foundation or through one that actually supports the VNSA. Either way, the more intertwined and accepted a VNSA becomes within a community, the stronger it is. As Epstein notes about insurgents, "the population of any given area holds the key to the success of any insurgency movement within that area."[112]

A community's social foundation is made up of the social relationships between community residents. These are formed and held together with formal and informal social ties and through social institutions like religious centers, community groups, and political agencies.[113] Bursik and Grasmick categorized these relationships as private (as in relationships among friends), parochial (as in casual relationships among neighbors that link to local groups), and public (those that link to agencies outside the community).[114] It is through these ties that a community exerts its influence over its members and what occurs within it.

A solid social foundation enables durable resistance to VNSAs. If a community has established accepted norms of behavior and community members feel free to act when these norms are violated, then VNSA development is difficult. As Sampson discovered in his research of gangs in the Chicago area, there were lower levels of crime and violence in communities that possessed greater collective efficacy.[115] Further, this collective efficacy often withstood competing influence of other structural variables. This factor was also seen operating in Iraq within what became commonly known as the "Awakening" movement. It was during this time that local Iraqi communities solidified their social foundations to actively reject unwanted insurgent elements within their communities.

The erosion of this type of solid social foundation has been found to correlate to increased VNSA activity. Gang research continually notes social instability in areas where gangs are active.[116] Fagan, for example, found that loss of intergenerational job networks was a catalyst for the disruption of the social foundations at the private and parochial levels.[117] Additionally, Vigil revealed that gang persistence was directly connected to the erosion of a "community's mechanisms for informal social control."[118] He found that economic and social marginalization of his target communities was at the heart of the degradation. A further note here: both

[102] Lafontaine, 30
[103] Klein, 214
[104] Ibid., 216
[105] Maggio, 190
[106] Watts, 7
[107] Chehab, 19
[108] Cohen, 166
[109] Ibid, 172
[110] Frake, 48
[111] Watts, 2
[112] Epstein, David G. "The Police Role in Counterinsurgency Efforts." The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology, and Police Science 59.1 (1968): 148-151.
[113] Klein, 218
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Ibid., 216
[117] Ibid., 218
[118] Ibid.

Fagan and Vigil identified diminished economic opportunities as being related to this variable, which links it to the lack of opportunities factor discussed above.

VNSAs across the spectrum often utilize similar methods to subvert resistance by existing social foundations or to exploit those that are already weak or open. In discussing insurgents, Epstein describes these as "persuasion," "favors," and "force."[119] He further notes that, "the first steps then for any insurgent to take are those that will insure him a welcome within the mass of the people."[120] Through these methods VNSAs have quickly degraded or, in some cases, even replaced the existing dominant social forces. In researching the Saints street gang, Venkatesh discovered that:

> In effect, the Saints consciously tried to "integrate" themselves into the social fabric, using economic power as their foundation to build relations with residents and local organizations... due to this comprehensive presence – spatial, material, ideological – I argue that the early 1990's signaled the arrival of the street gang as an important element in the social organization of the… community.[121]

This is mirrored by the activity of insurgent groups like the Taliban who have replaced, overlaid or integrated into tribal social foundations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as Al Qaeda related elements in Iraq who direct their members to inter-marry into host communities in order to integrate into a community's social fabric.

Weak Institutions

Communities with a rampant VNSA presence often possess weak or non-existent official institutions. Places where states or local governments refuse to or cannot effectively provide basic services leave a void that many VNSAs are eager to fill and capitalize on, further integrating themselves within the community. As such, this variable is closely tied to the social foundations variable. Examples of this are found across the spectrum of armed groups.

Gang research has identified many very clear situations where this variable is found active. Venkatesh noted a particularly stark example:

> In the void created by both Council and housing authority inaction, the Saints… channeled illicitly obtained revenues from drug economies to the general residential population. This process … had several effects on … the community: (1) it enables the Saints gang to vie for the sponsorship of resident constituencies that had previously granted their allegiance to the Council; (2) as such, the base of tenant allegiance the Councils had previously relied on was no longer self-evident, and their influence with government agencies that administered Blackstone slowly eroded because they could not unproblematically claim to be spokespersons.[122]

Positive gang contributions could be as simple and inexpensive as periodic disbursements of groceries and clothing.[123] Residents saw that the group provided a measure of public order such as enforcement, policing, escort, protection and punishment.[124] In essence, because of the official authorities' inactivity within the community, the street gang came to rival them as provider of public goods and services.[125] What resulted was the increasing and open acceptance of the gang and its illicit resources.[126]

The rise of other armed groups that reside further down the spectrum also often takes place in communities with weak official institutions and underserved populations. The groups fill the vacuums left by the incapacity of poor governments to serve and control its communities. These areas serve as the "safe havens and sanctuaries armed groups exploit to evade detection, plan operations, train forces, and stockpile supplies."[127] The discrediting and usurping of official government control is a priority of insurgencies in particular.[128] Hammes recognized that:

> In essence, these armed groups represent a return to earlier security arrangements, because a state has failed in its basic social contract of providing security for its population. These are the ethnic-sectarian militias we have seen develop around the world in response to insecurity. Groups like the Tamil Tigers and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq's (SCIRI's) Badr Militia are typical of reactionary groups.[129]

The power and service vacuums left by weak institutions promotes VNSAs across the spectrum into ever-more powerful paramilitary organizations.[130] Relatively small investments by official governments in basic services could be the easiest tools in thwarting VNSAs at their earliest stages.

Schools and Education

One of the most prevalent community services among various VNSAs is the establishment of schools and educational facilities. Parents in underserved regions are eager to give their children free educational opportunities. Not only do schools engender goodwill amongst the host community, it also provides the perfect recruiting ground for future members or supporters of VNSAs.

It is the prevalence of impressionable youth that makes schools such an attractive recruiting ground. One of the London suicide bombers, Sadiq Khan, was a mentor and assistant teacher at a school in Yorkshire

[119] Epstien, 148
[120] Ibid.
[121] Venkatesh, 92
[122] Venkatesh, 91
[123] Ibid., 96
[124] Ibid., 98
[125] Ibid., 102
[126] Ibid., 93
[127] Hanlon, 123
[128] Epstein, 151
[129] Hammes, 451
[130] Underwood, 10

and worked at a local youth center.[131] In Pakistan, some Madrassas have come under heavy criticism for "for their enrolling foreign Muslim students and for their training of a new breed of Taliban that is destabilizing the democratic government in Afghanistan and providing safe havens to Islamist militants."[132] In one case, students of the Jamia Hafsa and Jamia Faridia madrassas occupied a government building, directly challenging the Pakistani government. The stand-off resulted in a military operation and the deaths of dozens of students.

Lack of education is a prevalent, but not universal, characteristic of VNSA membership. It is also important to note here the interplay between lack of education and lack of opportunities. Economic opportunities become even more limited for those with little education. Maggio notes that regardless of race or other factors, lower education rates within a community can significantly raise the potential for street gangs to emerge.[133] Humphreys' study of VNSA activity in Sierra Leone found that education was a good predictor of membership.[134] Cohen, in talks with Palestinian militants within the Mia Mia camp, discovered that there were not enough books to go around in classrooms and teachers sometimes didn't even show up.[135] In Iraq, the insurgent Adnan Elias exhibits a typical profile. In his post-detention interview by Iraqi security forces, Elias admits to being illiterate with a 4th-grade general education before going on to describe his role in kidnapping and beheading policemen.[136]

Isolation and Marginalization

A community's actual or perceived isolation, marginalization or injustice within the larger society is commonly found in areas with a VNSA presence. This element can feed into and amplify a group's oppositional culture. In Sierra Leone, VNSA members were most often those that were "marginalized from political decision making… alienated from mainstream political processes."[137] Humphreys' analysis found a strong correlation between recruitment and alienation from the system. Individuals who were not connected to any political party were two to three times more likely to join VNSAs.[138]

Gang research shows similar findings. Vigil, for instance, revealed that both the "social and economic marginalization" of immigrant communities played a significant role in gang emergence.[139] In some cases the communities perceive not just marginalization but active hostility. Within the Chicago gang area Venkatesh studied, community members perceived themselves as an isolated community amidst hostile official authorities.[140] Jihadist groups looking to recruit insurgents for Afghanistan and Iraq focused on areas that exhibited some form of social isolation.[141] As Jessica Stern describes about the making of terrorists, "there's a very strong feeling of… profound injustice that the terrorist leaders are capitalizing on."[142] Paul Wilkinson describes it as "nursing grudges".[143]

Variable Interdependence

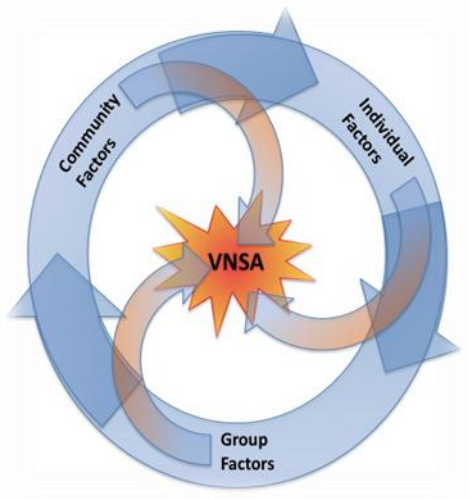
A review of common variables and characteristics indicates that many individual and group similarities are sourced in or tied to community-level issues. There is heavy interdependence between the lower levels and a community's lack of opportunities, weak social foundations, weak official institutions, and isolation or marginalization. These all clearly hold heavy influence on individual level factors such as seeking purpose, identity issues, status, respect, power and free time and boredom. It also can be easily tied to group level factors like oppositional culture.

Gang researchers and counter-gang practitioners have noticed this correlation as well. Klein and Maxson recognized that, "the main problem with street gangs in the long run is not the gangs themselves, but the societal and community processes that spawn these gangs."[144] This suggests that the community-level variables are the primary targets of counter-VNSA efforts and must be addressed first if a lasting impact is desired.

However tantalizing it is to ascribe a singular variable to VNSA membership, each aspect (individual, group and community) is interdependent and each impacts an individual's motivations to varying degrees. A recent article on street gangs recognizes this interplay:

> If a young adult is devoid of opportunities for advancement and the possibility to earn respect and develop an identity/purpose in his/her life, in addition to missing positive social influences the young adult is left vulnerable to filling these voids through socially undesirable outlets. Gang culture is one realm in which these voids may be filled in a relatively immediate manner for these young adults. It gives them a sense of belonging, identity, and a purpose.

[131] Herbert, Ian. Panel discussant. "The Making of a Terrorist." Talk of the Nation. Hosted by Neal Conan. 18 Jul 2005.
[132] Tufail, Ahmad. "Inquiry and Analysis No. 462." MEMRI. Accessed 23 Jan 2009.(http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=urdu&ID=IA46208)
[133] Maggio, 190
[134] Humphreys, 447
[135] Cohen, 166
[136] Elias, Adnan. Interview on Al-Iraqiya TV. 20 Apr 2005. Accessed 23 Jan 2009. (http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/144/650.htm)
[137] Humphreys, 440
[138] Ibid., 447
[139] Klein, 218
[140] Venkatesh, 101
[141] Watts, 7
[142] Stern
[143] Wilkinson, Paul. Panel discussant. "The Making of a Terrorist." Talk of the Nation. Hosted by Neal Conan. 18 Jul 2005.
[144] Klein, 106



The VNSA Variable Interdependence Cyclone

Conclusion

International security experts have recognized the rising similarities between different forms of non-state violent groups. This has led to a blurring of lines between what were previously considered distinct categories of groups. In turn, this blurring has suggested that there might be more fundamental likenesses between groups with potential implications for decisions on how to counter them.

Comparing the vast amount of existing gang research and counter-gang experience to current knowledge of other forms of VNSAs reveals common variables and characteristics at the individual, group and community levels of analysis. It suggests the supreme importance of community level variables in addressing VNSAs. Further, analyzing counter-gang experience and research can provide fresh insight into countering other VNSAs.

Armed non-state groups are a growing challenge to modern international and domestic security. Understanding the nature of and similarities between VNSAs at the individual, group and community levels is central to countering this increasingly dangerous security challenge.