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THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION, ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS, AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

PRIF Peace Research Institute Frankfurt
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Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, Nov. 21, 2020, in Doha, Qata.

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SUMMARY

The question of whether and how to engage armed non-state actors (ANSAs) has been crucial to both policymakers and researchers in peace and conflict studies for a long time. The recent events in Afghanistan, from the US negotiations with the Taliban since 2018/2019, to the latter's rapid takeover of power and control of most of the country's territory, to the question of how to deal with the new rulers, have brought this problem to the centre of public attention. What societal and political consequences does the recognition of armed non-state actors yield for conflict and its transformation? Does it always have a beneficial impact on relations between conflict parties? Can governments engage with former armed groups that come to power, without actually recognising them?

Since the end of the Cold War, with intrastate wars becoming the prevalent type of contemporary armed conflict, how states should react to, and interact with, ANSAs has become highly relevant for security policy and conflict management. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the "global war on terrorism" has moved transnational terrorism to the top of state security agenda in the West and beyond, and many non-state actors have been recast as terrorist actors. This is important because how a given ANSA is labelled and discursively framed opens up certain options for engagement, while precluding others. Whether or not to "talk to terrorists" (Toros 2008) is the most prominent version of the dilemma states — and sometimes international organisations (IOs) — face: On the one hand, they fear rewarding violent behaviour and coercive strategies, thereby creating precedents for other non-state actors. On the other hand, the willingness and/or pressure to put an end to violence push state actors and international organisations to engage with ANSAs, sometimes with the aim of transforming and integrating them into the political system. States and IOs may choose to initiate (secret) talks and negotiations or refrain from doing so, or they may start reframing an ANSA in a more accommodating or, conversely, more hostile way, thereby respectively opening up new trajectories for conflict transformation or increasing the potential for conflict escalation. Such interactions involve forms of recognition, non-recognition, and misrecognition of ANSAs by states and/or IOs.

This report presents the state of research on recognition dynamics in the context of violent conflicts and illustrates the theoretical issues at stake based on a discussion of contemporary examples. It draws on existing theoretical debates on recognition in Political Theory and International Relations with a view to transferring the insights to the empirical field of Peace and Conflict Studies, more specifically to the study of asymmetric armed conflict. The aim is to offer a novel analytical perspective to facilitate a better understanding of conflict dynamics which involve armed non-state actors. Most ANSAs do (more or less explicitly) seek recognition from specific other political/social actors, be they governments, other armed groups, international organisations, or local populations. While the Taliban in Afghanistan serves as a recurring example here, the report discusses other empirical cases from different world regions to shed light on the dilemmas involved in the recognition of armed non-state actors. Counterintuitively, recognising ANSAs can be conducive to both conflict transformation *and* escalation. There is no clear causal relationship between specific recognition practices and conflict outcomes. The examples provided in the report contrast with the widespread notion that recognition — as a practice — would (only) produce normatively desirable effects. In the context of armed conflict, the recognition of ANSAs does matter but it can have positive *and* negative consequences. The outcomes of recognition practices are hard to predict and this ambivalence cannot be

entirely dissolved. Lastly, this calls not only for further empirical research but also knowledge transfers between practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The question of whether and how to engage armed non-state actors (ANSAs) has been crucial to both policymakers and researchers for a long time. Developments in Afghanistan in the past few years have brought this topic into the public eye. What societal and political consequences does the recognition of armed non-state actors yield for conflict and its transformation? More specifically, how do recognition dynamics impact relations between diverse conflict parties (and their constituencies) and, beyond this, with transnational and international actors? The US talks with the Taliban, which culminated in a controversial peace agreement signed on February 29, 2020 in Doha, Qatar, and paved the way for the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan, illustrates the issues at stake in engaging and ultimately granting ANSAs some degree of de facto recognition. While many governments rejected formal negotiations with the Taliban for years (Bell 2014), the Trump administration introduced a policy turn and started unofficial talks in Summer 2018, leading to official peace talks from 2019 (International Crisis Group 2020: 9). Two aspects were particularly heavily criticised at that time. First, the Afghan government was excluded from the negotiation table because the Taliban refused to sit down with what they regarded as a “puppet regime”; second, while the negotiations were being conducted, the Taliban continued to use violence, resulting in casualties among Afghan forces, government officials and civilians (Allen 2020).

Although the peace agreement provided the Taliban with limited de facto recognition by the US government, sidelining the Afghan government and other non-state stakeholders had a huge impact. However, the negotiations and ensuing peace agreement paved the way for keeping the communication channels between the US and the Taliban open, even as the latter were forcefully taking power in summer 2021. With the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan, the issue of its official recognition as a de facto government has returned to the agenda. As of November 2021, no country has recognised the Taliban as a legitimate government. The governments of some countries, such as the US, Russia, China and Turkey, claim that there was absolutely no time pressure to do so.[1] Many political actors argue that the Taliban would have to fulfil certain criteria in order to receive international recognition (see the outlook of this report, p. 20). United Nations Secretary General Guterres has even suggested that withholding recognition is the only leverage there is to secure the Taliban’s compliance with fundamental international norms, such as respect of human rights (Anderson 2021).

As the Afghan example illustrates, the issue of states’ reactions to, and interaction with, ANSAs has become highly relevant for international security and conflict management. In many violent conflicts, armed non-state actors are conflict parties, whether as insurgents, rebels, guerrillas, warlords, militias, paramilitaries or private security companies. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the “global war on terrorism” has moved transnational terrorism to the top of state security agendas in the West and beyond, and many of these non-state actors have been recast as terrorist actors. Again, the Taliban are a prominent example of this, since US President George W. Bush depicted the Taliban

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[1] See: https://www.politico.com/news/2021/09/11/biden-taliban-government-afghanistan-511239 and https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/taliban-seek-recognition-offer-few-concessions-international-concerns (25 March 2022).

— who at that time (2001) were ruling Afghanistan — together with Al Qaeda as “terrorists” and “evil” (Toros/Mavelli 2014: 511). The discursive framing of a given ANSA is important since it opens up or precludes certain possibilities for engagement. Whether or not to “talk to terrorists” is the most prominent version of the dilemma states and international organisations face when weighing up options for managing and transforming conflicts.

We understand ANSAs as recognition-seekers, i.e., as actors trying to gain recognition by some significant other for a certain political cause, an identity, or the claim to represent a certain group. We call such significant others recognition-granters. These can be states, IOs, other non-state actors, or (parts of) the domestic population. When potential recognition-granters deny an ANSA recognition or ignore its claims, we speak of non-recognition. In cases where an ANSA is either recognised for something it did not seek recognition for or ascribed an identity that is not in line with its self-perception, an ANSA is misrecognised by the potential recognition-granter(s). Recognition-seekers experience acts of misrecognition as humiliation, disrespect, and/or the misrepresentation of their identity. Such experiences tend to heighten the duration and intensity of a conflict.

By applying the analytical perspective of recognition to asymmetric violent conflict, this report proposes a new approach to studying conflict dynamics and the potential for conflict transformation by granting recognition to or withholding it from armed non-state actors. Empirical examples from different regions and over time illustrate the salience of recognition in conflict settings. From a theoretical analytical perspective, we transfer insights from recognition-related studies in Political Theory and International Relations to Peace and Conflict Studies with a focus on asymmetric violent conflicts. Linking a recognition approach with a conflict transformation perspective is a very promising idea, but one that is largely unexplored so far. This report draws on a recent volume — Armed non-state actors and the politics of recognition (Geis/Clément/Pfeifer 2021) — that seeks to outline such a research agenda and illustrate its value in various empirical cases.[2] The report explores how recognition, non-recognition, and misrecognition practices affect conflict dynamics, whether some of these practices contribute to conflict escalation, and what unintended consequences may emerge due to recognition dynamics. By showing that ANSAs’ struggle for recognition is an essential part of conflict dynamics but that there is no straightforward reaction available to potential recognition-granters, this report highlights that issues at the intersection of identity and redistribution cannot be easily translated into guidelines for peacemakers. Nonetheless, applying a recognition lens helps us to better understand why conflicts escalate despite “goodwill gestures” and why attempts to transform conflict often fail, sometimes unexpectedly. We will focus in particular on the dilemmas faced by potential recognition-granters in the recognition of armed non-state actors. We argue that recognition is a deeply ambivalent practice, as its effects may promote conflict transformation *or* escalation. There is no clear causal relationship between specific recognition practices and conflict outcomes. Although the concept of recognition is usually discussed as normatively desirable (for exceptions see, e.g., Lepold 2021), this report shows that, in violent conflicts, it may have both positive and negative consequences: The outcomes of recognition practices are hard to predict, and this ambivalence cannot be entirely dissolved.

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[2] The theoretical and conceptual parts of this report draw on Clément/Geis/Pfeifer 2021. Some of the empirical examples in our report are covered in Clément/Geis,/Pfeifer but we have also added several of our own examples. While the above volume explored recognition dynamics during conflict, in stalemates, and in processes of conflict transformation from a recognition-seeking perspective, our report focuses on conflict transformation and a recognition-granting perspective.

The report is structured into six sections: Following the introduction, section 2 provides a conceptual discussion of types of recognition and describes ANSAs as recognition-*seeking* actors and states and other political entities as recognition-*granting* actors. The subsections delineate different types of ANSAs and the forms of recognition they receive, and discusses the conditions under which other actors (do not/mis-) recognise ANSAs, as well as the potential effects on conflict transformation. Building on this conceptual discussion, section 3 focuses on ambivalent effects of recognition processes in asymmetric violent conflicts and section 4 explores the notion of "thick" recognition in reconciliation processes, which is a demanding process requiring mutual acceptance and understanding of the other party's identity. Section 5 summarises the unintended consequences of recognition processes, and section 6 provides a brief outlook. By returning to the example of the Taliban and recent developments in Afghanistan, the outlook discusses forms of "tacit" recognition that frequently occur in violent conflict settings: Practising "engagement" with armed groups while trying to avoid "recognition", and the dilemmas that arise when an ANSA seizes power and forms the government of a state.

2. RECOGNITION IN THE CONTEXT OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

2.1 CONCEPT AND FORMS OF RECOGNITION IN ARMED CONFLICTS

"Recognition" is a prominent concept in several disciplines, including social philosophy, psychology, sociology, and international law, with the latter focussing on the formal recognition of states. Political "struggles for recognition" (Honneth 1995) have also received growing attention from empirical political science, as well as peace and conflict studies (Geis et al. 2015). Since the 2010s, international relations scholars have developed a growing interest in recognition issues that go beyond a formal international law perspective. In the specific context of *international* politics, recognition takes the form of a legal, political, and social practice between and among (groups of) states. For instance, recognising a political entity as a state grants that state rights and privileges in the international community; it is thus constitutive for a state's sovereignty to be effective and meaningful. However, beyond such legal acts, there are many more forms of social and political recognition at play as states strive for respect, status, and prestige, i.e., by seeking recognition from others for a particular identity. One of the central questions in interstate relations is whether and how the misrecognition of states, be it their identity or status in international society, promotes violent conflict and, *vice versa*, whether and how their recognition may foster peaceful relations (Wolf 2011; Lindemann 2010 and 2012; Lebow 2008). In the field of peace and conflict studies, researchers have yet to unlock the conceptual potential of recognition (Herr 2015; King/Samii 2020), particularly in the context of engaging ANSAs in conflict zones (Geis,/Clément/Pfeifer 2021).

This growing interest in recognition-related topics in International Relations notwithstanding, the most intensive debates on social recognition started in Social Philosophy and Political Theory in as early as the late 1980s and 1990s. The increase in different forms of "identity politics" and struggles for recognition by minorities and social movements in liberal societies at that time stimulated attempts at developing theories to capture these phenomena (Fraser 2000; Fraser/Honneth 2003; Taylor 1994). Recognition, whether that be of a specific identity, of rights, and/or of a particular status, was seen as one of the goals of (new) social movements organised around class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, or language. Recognition operates as a mechanism that constitutes a normative status (of equals) and grants rights and assigns duties within a society. In contrast, acts of misrecognition constitute acts of injustice in so far as they violate personal integrity and impede people from becoming full members of a social collective. Experiences of misrecognition can provoke strong responses, including violent resistance, by the individuals and social groups affected. In this sense, recognition is considered to be positive, even constitutive of identity, whereas misrecognition and the denial of recognition are seen as negative, destructive, hurtful.

Recognition is thus closely linked to the formation of individual and group identities. This makes the adaptation of recognition concepts from political theory for the context of asymmetric conflicts challenging. Many armed groups seek to attain political goals and might be willing to refrain from using violence once they have reached these goals — which implies a change of their identity over time (Herr 2015: 92). Thus, in the long term, an armed non-state actor may transform into a political party, enter government, or become a state-builder (Schlichte 2009: 178–202). Hence, in contrast to the more stable collective identities of states, identities of ANSAs are more fluid and can be transformed more easily, e.g., through changes in leadership, decreasing or increasing support of followers, or failures and successes in violent conflicts. Armed non-state actors can regroup, change their name, and they develop new narratives and agendas faster than states. It is important to keep in mind that, in the context of ANSAs in violent conflicts, disrespected and marginalised groups might not necessarily struggle for inclusion into the very community from which they were excluded, but they might fight for a completely different community to be created in the future (e.g., secessionist conflicts) (Heins 2016: 79). As a consequence, societies and states in which ANSAs operate may perceive them as a fundamental threat to the way in which their community is organised.

The close but problematic link between identity and recognition in asymmetric conflicts involving ANSAs already reveals some important characteristics of recognition and distinctions to be drawn between *forms* of recognition. First, recognition should not be seen as a *single* act (Agné 2013: 100–102) or as a thing which people "have". Rather, recognition must be understood as a dynamic process, a social interaction (Markell 2003: 18). Recognition in real-world politics *can* be based on single acts of recognition (such as being officially invited to peace negotiations or being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize) but it usually unfolds as a sequence of recognition acts or events. The second characteristic of recognition processes, therefore, is that they occur gradually and not necessarily in a linear fashion (Biene/Daase 2015). As such, they can also be stopped or reversed. Recognition and non-recognition, i.e., the deliberate withholding or denial of recognition, take complex and entangled forms. They constitute two poles on a continuum of policies and outcomes, ranging from highly formalised to very informal modes (Daase et al. 2015).

Again, the Taliban are an instructive illustration of the dynamic quality and reversibility of recognition processes. During the Cold War, the US supported the *mujahideen* in their struggle against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The *mujahideen* even made it into Western popular culture, e.g., as heroes in action movies — even though the group would later provide the ideological basis as well as some of the members of both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 onwards was only officially recognised as a legal government by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; while the US government under Clinton pursued diplomatic engagement with the regime (Anderson 2021). In 2001, the Taliban rule was overthrown by the US-led military intervention after being blamed for providing a safe haven to al-Qaeda, which was accused of carrying out the attacks of September 11, 2001. Since the beginning of the peace talks between the US and the Taliban in 2018, the US government and parts of the international community have granted it *some* de facto recognition as a negotiation partner. After the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in summer 2021, all state and international actors faced the issue of how to deal with the Taliban, given that humanitarian aid for the population and also the fight against ISIS in the region requires some kind of engagement and cooperation with them — while official recognition of the Taliban is still rejected by all states, many actors acknowledge that they have no choice but to "engage" with them (see also Anderson 2021; Kleinert 2021).

Another case in point is the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC) with whom the Colombian government started talks in 2012. Four years later, a ceasefire was announced and a peace deal signed. Subsequently, a disarmament and demobilisation process was initiated. In early 2016, then president Santos approached the US administration with the request to remove the FARC from its terrorism list. Santos' predecessor Uribe, however, had consistently accused the group of being "narco-terrorists" (Nussio 2016). This change of label was therefore a "thin" form of recognition, which allowed for deeper forms of engagement to follow. The distinction between "thin" and "thick" forms of recognition is an important conceptual tool in the Political Science work on recognition (Wendt 2003: 511–512; Lindemann 2010; Allan/Keller 2012; Strömbom 2014). Thin recognition between conflicting parties refers to recognition of each other "as agents, as autonomous 'entities' [that have] the right to exist and continu[e] to exist as an autonomous agent" (Allan/Keller 2012: 76). Thick recognition requires much more than accepting the other as an autonomous agent and negotiating partner, it means that "each party needs to understand the Other in terms of essential elements composing its identity" (Allan/Keller 2012: 77). The quest for a stable and just peace, it is argued, requires thick recognition among the conflict parties. It is evident that this is a demanding challenge for most parties involved in violent conflicts and requires the long-term transformation of narratives, rules, and institutions by those actors. Efforts towards the reconciliation of former conflict parties and mechanisms of transitional justice that are nowadays often part of post-conflict peacebuilding processes can promote such a long-term transformation of narratives and identities (see below, section 4).

As the recognition of political actors often occurs in gradual steps and is not necessarily an intended result but an eventual outcome of negotiations, it is useful to grasp these different degrees of "recognition as" through the identification of several "recognition events" (Biene/Daase 2015: 223–225): A first step comprises the thin recognition of an actor as a party to the conflict. This is relevant since states often try to deny the existence of a conflict or delegitimise armed non-state actors. The next step is an ANSA's acceptance as a participant in informal talks, indicating their current and future relevance for successful conflict management. The third step is the invitation to participate in formal talks. This move signals that the state government acknowledges the possibility that an ANSA might have legitimate claims to bring to the table (Biene/Daase 2015: 224). Each new step towards political inclusion represents a thicker form of recognition. A particularly thick outcome would be the recognition of a non-state actor as a political authority and legitimate representative of a collective with the capacity to enforce binding decisions. For instance, such an outcome was reached when the FARC were integrated into Colombia's political system as a regular political party. Table 1 below categorises ANSAs' recognition claims as either recognition *as* a political *actor* (e.g., as a party to a conflict) or recognition *for* a political *cause/project*.

Lastly, there are also cases of what could be called "hybrid" recognition (Pfeifer 2021), where different practices of recognition, non-recognition, and misrecognition occur simultaneously. An example for this is the Lebanese Hezbollah. While the US very clearly lists the entirety of Hezbollah, including its media outlets, as a terrorist organisation and imposes strict financial sanctions, the European position is more ambivalent. Many European countries as well as the EU decided only to designate Hezbollah's armed wing as a terrorist organisation, while recognising its political wing as a party and a part of the Lebanese political system. It thus keeps the door open for negotiations and transformation. However, the division into "two wings" neither corresponds to Hezbollah's self-perception, nor the functioning of its organisation. And "partial" recognition may not always have the desired effect. For instance, despite European actors' pragmatically motivated recognition of Hezbollah as an essential part of Lebanese society, its military capabilities have been significantly enhanced since 2011 (O'Sullivan 2013). At the same time, those actors who list the entire organisation as a terrorist organisation may have to look for ways around Lebanese state institutions, too, as Hezbollah has been part of the official Lebanese government for almost a decade now.

2.2 RECOGNITION-SEEKERS: ANSAS' PLURALITY

Recognition dynamics in the context of ANSAs involved in armed conflicts pertain to the relationship between armed groups as recognition-seekers and a variety of potential recognition-granters (see Table 1 below for a conceptual summary). There is a great variety of states, international and regional organisations, as well as non-state actors, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs), that ANSAs may seek recognition from. Moreover, several actors may become involved in recognition dynamics as third parties, whether as promoters or spoilers of the process. This is not least due to the complexity of conflict dynamics in which ANSAs may be involved, with them acting either as a conflict party in an internal armed conflict, which is often internationalised through external intervention, or operating transnationally. The examples of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Lebanese Hezbollah illustrate this complexity. In the case of the PLO, Hamas may have been seen as a spoiler when it comes to the PLO's recognition as a representative of the Palestinians during the Oslo process in the early 1990s. As for Hezbollah, interference by Israel, Western states, and Gulf states impedes its recognition as a regular part of Lebanese society and the political system, both in

Lebanon and in the region. This is not to say that this is the *only* reason for Hezbollah's "special" role, which is mainly due to its insistence on keeping arms. But recognition practices by third parties limit the positions an ANSA can take in a political and social context — and thus how its identity evolves. Hezbollah has sometimes stated that it does not actually care whether or to what degree European states recognise it — or if they misrecognise it by labelling it a terrorist organisation. At other times, though, it seems that Hezbollah invests significant discursive efforts into countering the terrorist image and also tries to demonstrate its commitment to and compliance with international norms, e.g., human rights (Pfeifer 2021). This begs the question whether *all* ANSAs seek recognition, and, if so, from whom, and how.

In order to better understand why, how, and from whom ANSAs seek recognition and under what conditions they may be successful, it is necessary to briefly unpack the umbrella term "armed non-state actors", as it covers quite a broad range of different types of actor. A basic distinction can be made between ANSAs that have a political agenda and those whose activities are economically motivated (Ezrow 2017: 85–86), even though these are not always exact opposites. This report focuses on ANSAs with a political agenda, since they can be expected to make more pronounced claims to recognition. ANSAs can be defined as "distinctive organizations that are (i) willing and capable to use violence for pursuing their objectives and (ii) not integrated into formalized state institutions […], [and that] (iii) possess a certain degree of autonomy with regard to politics, military operations, resources, and infrastructure" (Hofmann/Schneckener 2011: 604). It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between state and non-state actors, since ANSAs usually have a much more problematic relationship with the state than other non-state actors such as NGOs or companies. Many not only try to escape the state's control, but actively seek to overthrow it (Aydınlı 2016: 3–5). Yet, other ANSAs are —more or less deeply — intertwined with state structures. This is certainly true for those ANSAs that are both a violent actor and a political party, as the example of Hezbollah shows, as well as those who receive funding from their own or an external state. Moreover, ANSAs that are capable of gaining and maintaining territory, as well as exerting effective control over it and the civilian population living there, can establish structures similar to a state or at least take on state functions (Arjona/Kasfir/Mampilly 2015). Besides the examples of Hamas and the FARC cited above, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is also a good illustration. Indeed, some have argued that, at the peak of its power, the organisation showed many characteristics of the modern nation-state, even if this phase was very brief (Günther/Kaden 2016; Pfeifer/Reder 2017; Gerges 2016).

Academic typologies of politically motivated ANSAs stress that their agendas may also draw on socioeconomic, nationalist or ethnic, religious, or sectarian issue(s) (Zohar 2016). Scholars further distinguish groups according to their specific political goals, which range from setting up a state and providing state-like functions, to influencing global, regional, or local policy, to transforming governance and obtaining political power and control, to challenging local or global value systems (Ezrow 2017: 85–117). Depending on the respective goal, a recognition-seeker might have a greater or lesser chance of being successful. For instance, it can be expected that actors striving for statehood, independence, or secession will be denied recognition, given that they threaten the integrity of the state, sometimes even the state system as such, as some have argued in the case of ISIS (Gerges 2016).

Empirical studies show that states do not always react to such secessionist movements in the same way, sometimes even within one country: state reactions may range from the (partial) recognition of claims by one ANSA to harsh security measures against another, even though the two may have similar goals. A state's decision regarding how to deal with an ANSA may also not always follow purely military logic, where the ANSA perceived as the biggest threat is met with the harshest response. In the case of Nigeria, for example, the state has to position itself vis-à-vis several ethnic militias and non-state actors. The most well-known ANSA is Boko Haram, which the Nigerian government, along with large parts of the international community, has labelled a terrorist organisation. The government has also listed the secessionist movement Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) as a terrorist organisation, even though it is largely non-violent. Responses to both groups have primarily been military. In contrast, other ANSAs which are active in the oil-rich Niger Delta and seeking recognition for the region's ownership of and control over its resources, have been met with amnesty and development policies. Rather than listing these actors as terrorists, the government refers to them as militants, which opens up other options for engagement. As the Nigerian case shows, there is no direct connection between the degree and forms of violence an ANSA uses and the state's willingness to grant it recognition, nor can the state's response be deduced from an ANSA's political goal. But the situation in Nigeria also demonstrates that the practice of labelling an ANSA a terrorist organisation, irrespective of whether or not it resorts to terrorist tactics, triggers a military response and precludes other forms of engagement (Nwankpa 2021). This is one important form of misrecognition.

Besides goals and motives, most typologies distinguish between strategies and tactics employed by different groups (Ezrow 2017; Zohar 2016). Armed non-state actors may strive for change or the preservation of the *status quo*. Depending on their goals, they may or may not have territorial aspirations. As mentioned above, ISIS' attempts at establishing a quasi-state in Iraq and Syria is the most pronounced difference between it and al-Qaeda. To pursue their goals, ANSAs employ different methods of warfare, including conventional fighting, terrorism, and guerrilla tactics, as well as non-violent forms of contention. Moreover, ANSAs can be classified according to their internal organisation, in particular with regard to the characteristics of a group's leadership and its (local) supporters, as well as the relationship between them (Staniland 2014). Some have a strong leadership with hierarchical command structures and a high level of compliance and discipline from supporters on the ground (integrated groups). On the other end of the spectrum, some ANSAs may be very fragmented, with both a weak leadership core and low levels of control over local adherents. Depending on how it is organised and what its goals are, an ANSA may limit itself to local activities or engage on a transnational level. Thus, ANSAs also differ with regard to their transnational character (Zohar 2016).

	Recognition-granters addressed by diverse claims	
ANSAs' recognition claims	**Institutional recognition-granters** (domestic state, international organisations, and/or regional organisations)	**Recognition-granters "from below"** (the domestic population, a social group, a diaspora, another ANSA, and/or NGOs)
…as a certain kind of actor	As a conflict party and potential negotiation partner	As a governance actor providing public services and/or as security provider
	As a political party	As a political party
	As a normative actor complying with international norms	As legitimate representative of specific group claims
…for a political cause/project	Of the legitimacy of the political grievances it claims to represent	Ideational support by and quasi-diplomatic relations with politically like-minded ANSAs abroad
	For a marginalised/oppressed group identity (e.g., ethnic, religious, cultural-linguistic) it claims to represent	Support by local communities, even in the face of changing strategies
	Of its struggle for fundamental rights by international/regional organisations	

Table 1: Types of recognition claims and potential recognition-granters.

2.3 RECOGNITION-GRANTERS: INCUMBENT GOVERNMENTS, STATES, AND BEYOND

The examples given so far address cases in which the main recognition-granters are states, usually the domestic government authorities within a specific intrastate conflict. But ANSAs may also turn to third parties when they are not successful in their attempts to gain recognition from states, or they may address other social actors from the start. Table 1 above summarises some of the most common recognition-granters, both institutional actors and social actors "from below", in a variety of constellations of recognition claims. For instance, one important activity carried out by the above-mentioned Nigerian IPOB is the establishment of diplomatic missions in third countries (Nwankpa 2021). This adoption of a state practice belongs to the broader phenomenon of "rebel diplomacy", which encompasses the "strategic communication with foreign governments or agents, or with an occupying regime they deem foreign" (Coggins 2015: 106), or, as has been argued more recently, ANSAs' foreign policy (Darwich 2021). The Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK*) is a salient example in this respect. For decades, the PKK has been struggling, using both violent and non-violent means, for the recognition from the Turkish government of the Kurds' identity as an ethnic group, for their political equality and rights within Turkey, for the creation of an independent Kurdish state in the long term, as well as the recognition of the PKK as a representative of the Kurds. As the Turkish state neither recognised the Kurdish cause nor the PKK's claim to represent the Kurds, in the 1990s, the organisation turned to the EU instead. The PKK tried to frame its struggle as one of human rights and democratic principles, attempting to leverage the EU's accession negotiations with Turkey as a normative platform for its cause. Beyond this, it also set up several offices in European capitals and Brussels, including an umbrella organisation charged with coordinating its political work abroad. The hope was to gain the EU's recognition of its demands, but also that the EU would exert pressure on Turkey (Sienknecht 2021). The PKK's strategy succeeded in gaining some recognition for the Kurdish cause in Europe, but failed to achieve recognition of the ANSA as its legitimate representative or a potential negotiation partner. On the contrary, for the time being, the PKK is still on the EU's terrorism list, although the conflict dynamics in Syria and Iraq, including Western support for Kurdish conflict parties, has led some European actors and organisations to call for a re-evaluation.

Apart from through international organisations which possess international authority and can thus act as influential recognition-granters, recognition processes beyond the nation-state can also take place within the interactions of non-violent NGOs and armed groups. A more recent strand of literature has shown that humanitarian NGOs, in particular, do engage quite frequently with armed non-state actors in violent conflicts in order to implement humanitarian tasks, such as delivering humanitarian aid to civilians, helping with relief of prisoners, paving the way for informal talks between conflict parties, educating representatives of armed groups in regulations of international humanitarian law, and many other matters (e.g., Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019; Herr 2015; MacLeod et al. 2016; Schneckener 2013). The work of humanitarian NGOs usually takes place in a less visible environment than the official activities of states, which are carefully monitored and criticised in contemporary violent conflicts by an emerging international public. Representatives of non-violent NGOs have to engage with representatives of ANSAs on an almost daily basis in violent conflicts where such groups control access to territory and can threaten NGO workers with the use of force or blackmail them to give humanitarian aid to the ANSA. While NGOs might not consider themselves "recognition-granters", given their non-state status and generally moderate resources, their interactions with ANSAs can indeed contribute to informal low-level recognition processes. Empirical research has also shown that some ANSAs, especially those who hold some territorial control, might be willing to comply with specific norms of humanitarian law in order to gain recognition and the political and material benefits that come with it (Herr 2015: 235–240; Pfeifer 2021).

There is one last recognition-granter that is often neglected in the literature: domestic populations. Recognition practices are often seen as "(semi-)official" interactions between organised actors, such as social groups, states, and organisations. However, this narrowing down of recognition practices in politics is unwarranted, since armed groups have to rely on popular support to a certain extent as well. Seeking recognition from local communities, as well as regional or national audiences, is an important element of the recognition-seeking behaviour of ANSAs. Gaining or losing the recognition of "ordinary citizens" can have a significant impact on the chances of survival, (domestic and international) legitimacy, the reputation, and transformation of an armed group. In the Colombian example, the peace process and subsequent withdrawal of FARC forces from territories they had previously controlled led to a worsening of the local population's well-being in these areas, as civilians were suddenly exposed to other armed non-state actors exploiting the temporary power vacuum. The Colombian state failed to fill this gap, and thus fear of new violence among the remaining armed conflict parties spread. This suggests that local communities had placed a certain degree of trust in the FARC and that parts of the population recognised it as a governance actor (Idler/Boesten 2021). It also reveals the ambivalent effects that state recognition of a single ANSA in an armed conflict with several conflict parties can have on conflict transformation and violence. Another example for the relevance of broader communities as recognition-granters is the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) in the Northern Ireland conflict. The PIRA had fought nearly three decades for the reunification of Ireland before it changed its strategy towards a non-violent struggle: It declared a ceasefire in 1997, supported the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, and disarmed in 2005. Such a turnaround in a violent conflict is highly controversial in the eyes of the follower base and needs to be "sold" to them by the leaders of an armed group. While most seemed to want peace in Northern Ireland, they were not ready to pay any price. For the PIRA's leadership, this implied an intensive effort to retain the recognition of its followers: "[S]omething like 95 per cent of negotiations were with their own base" (Görzig 2021: 182).

These examples suggest that ANSAs usually need some degree of recognition from the local population as a representative for a certain cause and of a certain collective identity. When this identity narrative changes, it is no longer clear whether ANSAs will continue to enjoy the same recognition from their followers and larger support communities — but this change may be a necessary condition for further significant others to respond to ANSAs' recognition claims. Indeed, (potential) recognition-granters may have competing goals in conflict transformation and may impose different conditions on an ANSA.

These complex actor constellations demonstrate that recognition dynamics are always context-bound and ambivalent, and that they unfold at multiple levels. Armed non-state actors may address their recognition claims to various actors. Generally speaking, such claims take the form of demands for recognition addressed to a politically significant other; they are not fixed in time and may change in the process of (non-/mis-) recognition. More specifically, these demands can take two forms. First, ANSAs may seek recognition as a certain kind of actor, or for a certain quality they claim to possess, such as being a politically autonomous actor, (solely) representing a given community, mattering as a conflict party, or having more legitimacy than other ANSAs. Second, ANSAs may seek recognition for political grievances, their own or those of the community they claim to represent. For instance, ANSAs may claim that a certain social or ethnic group is not sufficiently represented in the political process or suffers from economic marginalisation, that a religious community is discriminated against, that certain values are not respected adequately, etc..

3. THE AMBIVALENCE OF RECOGNITION PRACTICES: EFFECTS ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

We now turn to practices of recognition and how they affect conflict dynamics. Recognition is only one of many ways in which potential recognition-granters react to recognition-seeking ANSAs. Researchers have discussed a variety of approaches, addressing different levels of action (individual, group, societal, and international), and considering strategies as disparate as repression and dialogue. We begin with the rationales that actors may have for not granting recognition — but rather resorting to violent means. This tends to escalate conflict, as does misrecognition, which we discuss as a related phenomenon. We then turn to cases where (thick) recognition is granted and examine the pitfalls related to this. As empirical illustrations, we draw in particular on the cases studies gathered in our recent edited volume (Geis/Clément/Pfeifer 2021).

3.1 WHY GRANTING RECOGNITION IS CONSIDERED TO BE RISKY: STATE RESPONSES, RECOGNITION REGIMES, AND MISRECOGNITION

States, international and regional organisations, as well as alliances among them, often employ military responses, such as counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and even warfare (Cronin/Ludes 2004; Moe 2021) against ANSAs. Many states adhere to a no-negotiation policy (at least publicly) and sometimes prohibit engagement by law (Dudouet 2010). Arguments against engagement include the unreliability of outcomes (Zartman/Faure 2011: 5), the possibility of failed attempts provoking further escalation of violence (Steinhoff 2009: 302), the fear of losing political credibility (Pecastaing 2011: 188), and raising non-state actors' legal and/or social status (Miller 2011). However, repressive measures often result in the radicalisation of non-state actors' agendas and/or the use of increasingly violent means of action.

Another problem for potential recognition-granters is that they cannot be sure how their intended acts of recognition will be interpreted by the ANSA and third parties. The perception of acts of recognition by different actors varies within a given conflict. When a state starts engaging in acts of recognition, such acts might not be acknowledged as such, especially in the conflict situations mentioned above. Indeed, attempts at initiating a recognition process might not be *perceived* as acts of recognition by the recognition-seeking ANSA, or might be misperceived as *ingenuine* acts of recognition. Again, the US-Taliban peace negotiations from 2018–2020 might provide an interesting case in point: While the US government in fact recognised the Taliban as a crucial conflict party in Afghanistan, without whom peace would not be possible, and sat down at the negotiation table with the group, US representatives' assessment of the Taliban remained very critical. Different Taliban representatives sent extremely unclear messages about the future of, for example, women's rights and democracy within Afghanistan, and the number of violent acts committed by the Taliban remained high. Both US representatives and the Taliban viewed each other with a profound mistrust, which suggests that a mutual perspective of talking to the "enemy" still prevailed (International Crisis Group 2020). The subsequent escalation of the civil war in Afghanistan in summer 2021 showed how fragile and precarious this thin de facto recognition had actually been.

In terms of legitimating violence against ANSAs and *not* seeking non-violent forms of interaction, international "recognition regimes" play an important role (Ringmar 2015; Hensell/Schlichte 2021). Armed non-state actors' claims to recognition have a higher chance of being heard and considered legitimate in specific international normative contexts — while others have a high probability of being misrecognised, which tends to escalate conflicts. “Recognition regimes” have changed since the end of the Second World War. One example of a favourable regime for recognition-claiming was the global era of decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s: ANSAs were granted recognition comparatively easily for their participation in liberation struggles. The current recognition regime, on the other hand, is characterised by the delegitimisation of ANSAs’ political agendas based on the actions they use. Under this regime, recognition claims are suppressed as part of the agenda of counterterrorism or countering “violent extremism”, which imposes severe restrictions on the possibility of entering into dialogue (Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019). Not only is it harder for newer ANSAs to be cast as anything other than terrorist organisations, but older ANSAs are also re-evaluated and misrecognised under the counterterrorism norm that has emerged and diffused in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA.

The current recognition regime is thus associated with specific practices of misrecognition. One important form of misrecognition is the political practice of labelling ANSAs, which is deeply intertwined with ANSAs’ processes of identity formation through rejecting certain labels, attempting to establish counter-discourses, and recasting their identity. Labels, such as “terrorists”, “insurgents”, or “freedom fighters”, are essentially contested and socially constructed through knowledge/power hierarchies (Bhatia 2008). Practices of naming and labelling are what gives ANSAs the status of an “Other” in the first place. Practices of misrecognition tend to have long-lasting impacts. Casting an ANSA as a terrorist organisation, for instance, confers a label that is particularly “sticky”, even when the ANSA is no longer listed as a “terrorist organisation” or perceived as such by most states (Dudouet 2021: 249). Sticky labelling impacts the way in which the majority population, as well as third parties, perceive an ANSA’s struggle and its responsibility in the conflict. Further, it constrains the scope of future actions the state is willing to take in response to the ANSA. States that have cast an ANSA as a terrorist organisation tend to reject dialogue and favour repression over de-escalation (Toros 2008). Thus, it is the framing of an ANSA which is contested, negotiated, or imposed in recognition processes. At the same time, however, practices of naming also enable an ANSA’s identity to be recast, thereby opening up a space for the recognition of their actorness and claims, and offering potential for conflict transformation.

It is important to note that the current recognition regime has a disproportionate effect on those ANSAs who (claim to) represent Muslim communities (Clément 2014; Pfeifer 2017; Mavelli 2013). Salafi Jihadi armed groups in Syria, Mali, or Somalia (Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019), for example, are considered by many external interveners and governments to be especially “radical” in terms of means, goals, and ideologies and thus least eligible for talks or even negotiations. They are particularly prone to being misrecognised (e.g., labelled “terrorist” or “extremist”). The transnational medial emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism tends to reinforce this, as ANSAs with a Sunni Islamist agenda receive more media attention than others. Today this trend extends far beyond the West. For example, ANSAs claiming to represent the Uyghurs have been negatively impacted by repeated claims made by the ISIS that the organisation had supporters as far away as China. The case of the Chinese government’s treatment of the Uyghur community is also an example of other forms of misrecognition which are associated with, but go beyond, labelling. Recognition-granters can choose to actively misrecognise ANSAs for something they do not in fact identify with and for claims they do not put forward. For instance, an ANSA might seek recognition as the representative of a religious community, but the recognition-granter may choose to treat it as a regional minority that deserves certain rights and access to resources — while simultaneously ignoring, downplaying, or denying its actual identity claim. Such acts of misrecognition are sometimes accompanied by violent state practices directed at symbols of this very identity. This often co-occurs with the labelling practice of designating parts of an ANSA or the community they claim to represent as terrorists. The Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang province, notably since the 9/11 attacks, is a case in point (Chung 2002). While the region has been granted autonomy rights and measures of redistribution were taken by the Chinese government, simultaneously pursues a counterterrorism policy, has banned Muslim religious symbols, and arbitrarily confines Uyghurs in re-education camps under horrendous conditions (Chung 2018).

Overall, the counterterrorism norm has enabled state actors to increasingly ignore and largely reject ANSAs' recognition claims, in particular over the past two decades. Yet this is not a completely new phenomenon. This specific form of misrecognition has, in fact, adapted its characteristics to changing recognition regimes and historical political contexts. For instance, the LTTE (*Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam*) in Sri Lanka and the PKK in Turkey were already labelled as terrorist organisations in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, there are historical cases of coordinated practices of misrecognition among states. The international reactions to Armenian and Palestinian terrorism in the late 1970s and early 1980s come to mind here. Two Armenian transnational groups, the *Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia* (ASALA), based in Lebanon and Soviet Armenia, and the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) active in North America and Western Europe, conducted more than 150 attacks against Turkish targets in Western countries, which resulted in the death of over 60 Turkish citizens between 1975 and 1983. A central goal was the acknowledgment of the genocide committed against the Armenians in 1915 as well as the establishment of a memorial culture, but the groups also had material claims such as the payment of reparations by the Turkish government and the return of territories to Armenia. Having intervened in the Lebanese Civil War by invading southern Lebanon in order to fight the PLO, the Israeli government tried to "leverage Armenian terrorism […] as a concern shared with Turkey" (Ben Aharon 2019: 276) and thereby ameliorate bilateral diplomatic relations, which had deteriorated in the 1970s and 1980s. While there were indeed some connections between Palestinian and Armenian groups in Lebanon, the Israeli government strategically used the labelling of violent activities conducted by Armenian organisations as terrorism in order to achieve a rapprochement with Turkey: "Israel held the very firm position that terror is terror is terror, and that there was no difference as to whether this was Armenian or Palestinian terror" (Ben Aharon 2019: 289). Israel's attempt to establish a common language of misrecognition with Turkey was successful to the extent that it contributed to the normalisation of Israeli-Turkish relations and the launching of a research forum with officials from both sides to "enhance cooperation against Middle Eastern terrorism" (Ben Aharon 2019: 291). Beyond Turkey, however, only the US and Canada participating in labelling Armenian activities as "terrorism", whereas other Western countries confined themselves to expressing their sympathy with the victims of the attacks (Ben Aharon 2020).

This historical case shows several things: First, misrecognition can be used for strategic purposes which are not necessarily related to an ANSA's identity or its political actions or the severity of the threat it poses. Second, the labelling of an ANSA — in this case as “terrorists” — actually matters for creating what could be called a recognition community, in which there is consensus on how to define and thus tackle the issue. Third, such communities need to be differentiated from the more or less global recognition regime discussed above.

4. THE AMBIVALENCES OF THICK RECOGNITION IN ASYMMETRIC CONFLICTS

Misrecognition, especially in the form of labelling, has a particularly negative impact on conflict transformation as it effectively precludes conflict resolution through negotiated settlement (Dudouet 2021; Toros 2008). It is also often directly associated with the use of force. In scholarly debates, the need to engage ANSAs politically is increasingly being acknowledged — as are the political, legal, and ethical dilemmas and challenges that come with it (e.g., Dudouet 2010; Görzig 2010; Toros 2008; Zartman 2009). Despite the obstacles and challenges they involve, recognition processes do occur in the context of asymmetric armed conflict. But they sometimes lead to unexpected and unintended consequences and do not always result in conflict transformation.

At a basic level, acknowledging that there *is* a conflict is not enough. The state actor needs to recognise the opposing non-state actor as a party to the conflict (Biene/Daase 2015). This may sound trivial, but, on closer examination, is much more complicated. Suggesting that an armed group is part of a transnational terrorist network, an import of an ideology or conflict foreign to the respective society, or a mere extension of a third state’s interests (e.g., a “proxy”) frames an ANSA as not being a legitimate conflict party to be reckoned with (e.g., Pfeifer 2021; Toros/Sugal 2021). Although recognition may start as a single act (e.g., an official speech), it should be understood as a process which requires time and commitment to take root. As outlined above, there are different ways of granting and different forms of recognition, such as *thin* and *thick* acts of recognition. While thin acts are necessary to “move conflict in a more peaceful direction” by opening minimal space for dialogue (Strömbom 2014: 171), they are not enough to transform an armed conflict into a political conflict that can be dealt with through (reformed) political institutions. In contrast, thick acts of recognition are aimed at understanding the subjectivity of the other actor, accepting its difference, and respecting its unique identity (Strömbom 2014). Thick acts are much more difficult to attain and require much iteration in order to transform conflict relations over time. In short, the recognition of an ANSA as an *autonomous, legitimate* conflict party constitutes a thin recognition outcome. There are even thinner forms of recognition, though, as exemplified by the Turkish government’s minimal acknowledgement of the PKK as an unavoidable conflict party but not as a legitimate representative of part of the Kurdish population. It is difficult to reach thick acts of recognition in asymmetric conflicts, which are characterised by a particularly unequal distribution of political power, military resources, and legal status. Crucial to this end is the conflict parties’ recognition of their mutual *interdependence*, which might be possible in situations where neither conflict party has the capacity “to force the other side to yield to their demands” and where their effective power is thus “essentially equivalent” (Levinger 2013: 48).

Thick acts of recognition are very demanding and usually embedded in long-term reconciliation processes in post-conflict societies. Yet, if they can and in fact have occurred in the context of international politics, such as in the case of France and Germany after the Second World War, they should be possible in asymmetric conflicts as well. State and non-state actors in an intrastate violent conflict often emerge from the same society or state entity. Thus, both are intimately connected in ways that states in international politics are not. Strömbom (2014: 170) stresses that identity is at the core of acts of recognition aiming to "transform destructive relations into ones that allow for differences and promote shared responsibility for injustices in the past". Indeed, moving towards understanding, accepting, and respecting the other's subjectivity and difference not only modifies the interaction between conflict parties, it also slowly changes each party's identity and, ultimately, each party's perception of the relationship. Such changes within the conflict structure usually take a long time. And even when they do occur successfully, as could be said about the Northern Ireland conflict, cleavages may persist and re-emerge as a source of conflict in times of political transformation. The recent activities of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups in the context of the Brexit gave rise to fears that the Good Friday Agreement might be jeopardised (Blazakis/Clarke 2020). This underlines that recognition processes are dynamic and, in principle, reversible. Structural changes in conflict transformation depend partly on the deconstruction of reciprocal enemy images, both by leaders and the population (Gross Stein 2001: 196–200), which is a long-standing goal in mediation and conflict transformation.

Thick acts of recognition are relevant in the following three processes: the recognition of social dignity, the recognition of mutual responsibility for the past, and the recognition of the former opposing party as an inherent part of the respective society/community. A typical example for the first of these processes — the recognition of the opposing party's social dignity (Poder 2019: 76) — would be the recognition of an indigenous people's rights in a multi-ethnic society. Especially in contexts where the humiliation of a social collective had a profound impact on fundamental rights, redressing former acts of mis-/non-recognition is of fundamental importance (Haldemann 2008). It requires showing respect for the leaders of former enemy group(s) as symbolic carriers of the social dignity of a collective. For instance, in the Guatemalan conflict, which opposed the government and several guerrilla groups representing leftist political agendas and/or indigenous grievances for over 30 years, the transformation of the conflict towards a peace settlement accelerated when the newly elected president, Alvaro Arzú, appointed a former leader of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, EGP), Gustavo Porras Castejón, to head the country's peace commission. This cooperation led to a series of agreements and, ultimately, to signing the final peace agreement in December 1996.

The second process — the recognition of a mutual responsibility for the past — is aimed at the coexistence of different macro and microhistories. It can consist in promoting truth inquiries, the emergence of inclusive histories, multi-voiced historical reappraisal, and so forth. Such processes are now well documented in the Northern Irish case (McQuaid 2019). Aside from public records and the truth commission's archives, McQuaid shows that storytelling projects by civil society organisations and community workers have placed empathetic practices of "witnessing" at the centre of remembering the past. Such bottom-up projects go beyond the mutual recognition of communities and allow reflection on (shifting) narratives and experiences in interactions.

The third process — the recognition of a former enemy group and, beyond that, a former enemy community, as an inherent part of the larger social fabric — aims to move beyond mere coexistence. Coexistence is not enough to sustain peace in the long run. Scholarship on the Rwandan conflict and genocide is a clear example of this: on the local level, families of génocidaires live side by side with survivors of the very families they destroyed, and all depend on each other for economic survival and old-age care. Since Rwandan law proscribes any reference to ethnic identities, enduring tensions and distrust among Tutsis and Hutus are unaddressed, silenced, and relegated to the private life of the mind (Buckley-Zistel 2006, Schliesser 2018). Beyond public policies of reconciliation, this third process of recognition would involve micro processes within society: changes in attitudes, selective remembering and forgetting, and for intersubjective contacts across communities to become customary.

However, the politics of reconciliation is highly controversial in all post-conflict societies and often the political will to recognise the dignity of all victims equally is lacking. Researchers have often observed the discursive constitution of “good victims” who deserve recognition and reparation, and “bad victims” who are considered undeserving and whose suffering is rendered invisible. This discrimination is usually a reflection of the interests of the ruling political elites: there is evidence of these exclusionary effects in several transitional justice regimes (e.g., Algeria, Argentina, Chile, Colombia) in that victims of non-state violent actors (e.g., those of the FARC in Colombia) are granted recognition, whereas victims of repressive state violence are disrespected or simply ignored (Humphrey 2013).

5. UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF RECOGNITION PROCESSES

A politics of recognition between state and non-state actors may move a conflict towards peaceful settlement (conflict transformation), but it may also leave the relationship between the opposing parties unchanged (conflict continuation), or it may even backfire and cause interactions to deteriorate (conflict escalation). This may be the result of unintended consequences.

First, the costs of granting recognition to an ANSA may be too high with regards to human lives, human rights, and moral values. For example, recognising al-Shabaab as a potential partner in negotiations with the Somali government and, eventually, a legitimate political actor may have dire long-term consequences for the Somali population, especially considering al-Shabaab’s position on human rights issues (Toros/Sugal 2021). There is currently a similar discussion in the Afghanistan context since the Taliban, who are now in power again, grossly violate human rights and overtly reject the liberal values that Western interveners have tried to establish during the last two decades of their military interventions in the country. As of November 2021, no state government had officially recognised the Taliban as a legitimate government of Afghanistan — but many acknowledge the necessity to “engage” with the Taliban in order to reach certain political goals (see the outlook section below).

Second, the recognition of an ANSA may strongly affect other non-state actors occupying the same political space, especially competing ANSAs which are not granted similar recognition. Indeed, the recognition of some conflict parties but not others may alleviate tensions in the short term (e.g., with the largest ANSA) but risk aggravating them in the long term (e.g., with smaller/more localised ANSAs). In the case of South Sudan, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) — the larger opposition actor — was eventually invited to the negotiation table, while all other ANSAs that had opposed the regime were treated as one group, with one voice. While such a practice was expedient and enabled the signing of a peace accord, misrecognising the other ANSAs as one group negated their differences (and different needs) and ultimately led to a renewed armed conflict (Pring 2017). Fuelled in part by the values the mediator deemed key to a successful negotiation process, this transformation failure is due to the unbalanced redistribution of recognition. By recognising one conflict party, others are excluded or reified. The latter has the potential to result in direct conflict escalation or a future relapse into armed conflict, in a slightly different configuration of conflict parties.

Similar arguments have been made with regard to power-sharing agreements as a means of conflict resolution, an approach which may effectively undermine conflict prevention. Power-sharing has become one of the main tools of peace-building efforts, particularly in African conflict settings. In cases where third countries perceive an ANSA’s military power in the context of an asymmetric conflict as dangerous (enough) to necessitate an intervention, such power-sharing agreements usually involve the inclusion of insurgent groups into governments of national unity. However, in situations where ANSAs have a prospect of receiving “parcels of state power in return for ‘peace’” (Mehler/Tull 2005: 394), incentives arise to resort to violence in the future. The recognition of an ANSA has other impacts on non-state actors using non-violent means of opposing the state. They may also be actively suppressed by state authorities that are unwilling to make more concessions in the future and prefer to pre-emptively crush any other form of contestation. In such cases, the costs of recognising an ANSA are borne by the non-violent non-state actors.

Third, ANSA being recognised by third parties, while at the same time not being recognised by the state party to the conflict, can aggravate the conflict situation. In theory, the recognition of an ANSA’s legitimacy (claims and representation) by another state, a community of states, or a mediating party would provide it with some measure of protection and force the state party to participate in peace talks. In practice though, ANSAs’ recognition by third parties is often used by the state actor to delegitimise the ANSA, casting it as a foreign element, imported by malevolent foreign powers and representing alien ideologies. The unintended consequences range from conflict continuation (e.g., in the case of the PKK, whose thin recognition by European actors did not mitigate its conflict with the Turkish government) to conflict escalation (e.g., in the Somalian case, with both sides of the conflict accusing each other of being a foreign import).

There are also some ambivalences inherent in the recognition of ANSAs, which sets these recognition processes apart from recognition between and among states. This has to do with the close connection between identity and recognition discussed above. In international relations research, recognition is still predominantly used in interstate relations and refers to the legal or moral status of a state actor, the collective identity of a specific state, its role and status in international politics. While state entities are regarded as relatively stable and durable, and state identities are usually expected to change only very slowly, the organisational make-up and identities of ANSAs are much more fluid. The constellations within state-ANSA relations in violent conflicts are much more contingent and characterised by asymmetries in legal status, resources, legitimacy, means of warfare, etc.

Armed non-state actors can have quite different intra-group characteristics, presented in the following as ideal-type opposing poles: They can be organised around a centralised charismatic leadership or can be made up of a more network-like decentralised structure; they might form a cohesive group or a just a loosely organised, fragmented collection of fighters and politicians; they can have very firm, rigid ideological beliefs or be rather “pragmatic” in their ideological agendas; they can hold territories or not; they can be open to talks and negotiations from the very beginning or strongly reject any engagement by and with state actors, be they governments, other states or international organisations; they can enjoy a broad legitimacy among local populations or be regarded and feared as massive threat; they might accept a certain limit to the use of force as a “last resort” or use force in a “ruthless” way, etc. (Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019: 41). The highly diverse characteristics of ANSAs as well as their more flexible, incalculable dynamic as a social group (compared to a state entity) makes it very difficult to predict under what conditions the recognition of an ANSA by a state actor (or international organisation) would have positive effects on conflict dynamics. Indeed, even in cases where ANSAs have been granted some recognition, it is difficult to generalise the positive potentials of recognition processes. As research has shown, there are armed non-state actors that are able to engage constructively in a peace process. They might transform into a political party that refrains from the use of force (Schlichte 2009) or they might be willing to strike “compromises” in political negotiations. One reason for this is that such groups are also dependent on greater legitimacy granted by significant others, including local populations and international organisations (Schlichte/Schneckener 2015; Clément et al. 2021). This, in turn, implies a gradual transformation of the group’s identity (e.g., in Northern Ireland, see Görzig 2021).

On the other hand, such actors are often volatile and undergo rapid change in terms of leadership, structure, names, goals or means: They can, for instance, split into “moderates” and “radicals”, especially in the course of a peace process, so that a part of the group reassembles (under a different name), continues fighting and acts as a “spoiler” to the peace process (Schneckener 2013: 7–9). The contingent dynamics that revolve around armed groups’ structure and survival imperatives render it difficult to offer clear-cut policy recommendations. Apart from the “vertical” ANSA-state relationship, “horizontal-vertical” ANSA-ANSA-state relations need to be considered as well: In most contemporary violent conflicts, there are numerous active armed groups active which often compete against one another (Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019: 52–53). State governments and international organisations react quite differently towards the different groups. As a result, dynamics of inclusion-exclusion and “double standards” with regard to the engagement of armed groups can (unintentionally) fuel violent conflict instead of reducing it and also frustrate non-violent groups that might have played a constructive role in a post-conflict political system (Nwankpa 2021; Pring 2017).

6. OUTLOOK: PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT?

We have referred in this report to numerous examples of violent conflicts, in which quite different types of armed groups have been labelled as “terrorist”. The ubiquitous labelling of organisations as “terrorist” often serves the interests of an incumbent national government and ruling elite. In order to open up potential avenues for peaceful conflict transformation, the labelling of armed groups — which forecloses political or social recognition — needs to be evaluated much more carefully by the actors involved. Empirical research shows that ANSAs can be differentiated according to many criteria, such as structure, ideologies, goals, means, resources, which should be mirrored in political discourses around specific armed groups. Lumping ANSAs together under the “sticky” label of “terrorist organisation” will usually not promote conflict de-escalation (Dudouet 2021: 238–243; Haspeslagh 2021). Political actors should take seriously the differentiation and complexity in assessing each and every group individually, also recognising that not all are capable of or willing to conduct negotiations (since they might lack the knowledge, expertise, or staff to take part in official negotiations; Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019: 49–54). Refraining from placing ANSAs into fixed categories implies acknowledging that group identities, political goals, and means change over time — and that ANSAs might be engaged with differently in the future, which means that a closed-door policy towards them should be avoided.

The conflict dynamics in Afghanistan clearly illustrate this complexity and fluidity: The Taliban have been stigmatised by the US and their allies as “evil” “terrorists” in the aftermath of 2001; seventeen years later, they were invited to the negotiation table in Doha by the US government under Trump (whereas the Afghan government was excluded from these negotiations). And in summer 2021, they have returned to power by force and formed a government. The Taliban are thus transitioning from a non-state actor to a *de facto* government, although the latter is not formally recognised by other governments to date. A discussion on whether the Taliban can indeed be conceptualised as a “state actor” is beyond the scope of this report but would reveal the difficulties of drawing a distinction between state and non-state actors.

Following the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the problematic question arose for external actors of how to deal with the Taliban. The ensuing political discourse on the “(non-)recognition” of the Taliban points to a frequent political phenomenon called “engagement”. State actors and international organisations, such as the European Union, do practice engagement with the Taliban — although all the former are quite uncertain whether the Taliban will act as reliable interlocutors or stick to commitments. Such practices of engagement, for example, occurred in the context of state actors evacuating their own and Afghan state nationals after the Taliban takeover and of maintaining humanitarian aid for the population. The necessity of having to deal with armed groups without legitimising them has been discussed in the scholarly literature on the role of humanitarian NGOs in violent conflicts, from which we also borrow the term “tacit recognition” (Dudouet 2021: 246).

NGOs very frequently engage with armed non-state actors in very practical matters and thus contribute to recognition processes in the long run, without necessarily being aware of it or intending to increase the legitimacy of a given armed group. NGOs can and do play a constructive role in enabling mediation efforts and promoting norm change, e.g., by socialising representatives of an armed group into norms of international humanitarian law (Göldner-Ebenthal/Dudouet 2019; Herr 2015; Hofmann/Schneckener 2011; MacLeod et al. 2016; Schneckener 2013). These manifold activities conducted by NGOs might not constitute thicker forms of recognition, which would imply the legitimation of the ideology or political claims of an armed group — but these forms of "engagement" might be regarded as "tactical or tacit recognition of ANSAs as valid and credible interlocutors who are able to abide by their commitments" (Dudouet 2021: 246).

Interestingly, as the new rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban are not content with mere "engagement" by external actors. They explicitly demand recognition from the international community and state governments. As the Taliban spokesman Zbihullah Mujahid said at a news conference in Kabul in October 2021: "Granting recognition to the current system is the right of Afghans and no one can deprive us of this right nor will it benefit anyone. [...] Our message to America is, if non-recognition prolongs, problems of Afghanistan prolong, it is the regional problem and could eventually become a problem for the world". He remarked that this message was already conveyed by Taliban leaders to US officials at a meeting in Qatar.[3]

The recognition-seeking behaviour of the Taliban already manifested in the previous decade, when they opened up an office in Qatar and engaged in direct and indirect talks with representatives from different countries. Especially in the last two years, the Taliban have increased their diplomatic efforts and embarked on official trips to Uzbekistan, Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, China, and Pakistan — known colloquially as the "Taliban's world tour".[4] Taliban spokesman Mujahid also claimed that the Taliban would fulfil all conditions required for the world to formally recognise their government and pointed out a certain double standard which he saw in international politics: "There are issues in numerous countries vis-a-via international laws, but [those countries] have been formally recognized. […] They have no democratic systems, they have dictatorships, kingdoms and other ruling systems. Why have they been recognized and why are conditions being set for us?"[5] Crucial international recognition-granters, such as the European Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and governments of states such as the US or Turkey demand that the Taliban fulfil certain criteria in order to receive recognition, and that their *actions* will be judged in this regard, not their rhetoric. Among these criteria are the establishment of an inclusive government, assurances about respect for human rights, and the rejection of terrorist activity on Afghan territory. Western actors have different notions of what constitutes an "inclusive" government than for example, the Pakistani government, referring also to the inclusion of women in government.[6] The US and the EU have also suggested that they would prefer the emergence of a power-sharing or transitional government arrangement that would include more Afghan factions than the Taliban (Anderson 2021). The all-male interim government presented by the Taliban also includes individuals that are blacklisted as designated terrorists by some states, such as Interior Minister Haqqani.

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[3] Quoted in: https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-upbeat-about-prospects-for-recognition-/6292280.html (30 October 2021).

[4] See: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/taliban-afghanistan-international-recognition (7 October 2021).

[5] Quoted in: https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-upbeat-about-prospects-for-recognition-/6292280.html (30 October 2021).

[6] See https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/09/taliban-seek-recognition-offer-few-concessions-international-concerns (28 September 2021).

Since many international actors have vested interests in achieving stability in Afghanistan and in protecting human rights and continuing humanitarian aid, a certain amount of engagement with the Taliban is inevitable. Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative and Vice-President of the EU Commission stated in a news conference in August 2021: "The Taliban have won the war, so we will have to talk with them. [...] We will deal with Afghan authorities such as they are, at the same time remaining naturally vigilant. [...] I haven't said that we are going to recognize the Taliban. [...] I just said that we have to talk with them for everything, even to try to protect women and girls".[7] Borrell expresses an attitude towards the Taliban that many other potential recognition-granters seem to share: They want to try and avoid formal recognition, and intend to wait and see how the new rulers of Afghanistan will actually behave, before considering further diplomatic steps. Avoiding formal recognition also allows for more flexibility in dealing with the Taliban, so that state actors and international organisations can calibrate their responses towards the regime. Formal recognition might be used as a long-term incentive to secure the Taliban's compliance with the demands of the international community.

In conclusion, in the interactions with armed non-state actors, recognition implies many risks and high costs for state actors, as well as other official agencies and authorities, and, hence, tends to be avoided by state actors during violent conflicts. However, from a practical perspective, small, sometimes nearly invisible instances of thin recognition by quite different recognition-granters do happen, often unintentionally and usually without calling such steps "recognition": by local populations, informal local intermediaries facilitating talks, NGO representatives, and other armed groups, among others. Navigating recognition dynamics and avoiding their potential pitfalls calls for further empirical research and knowledge transfers between practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

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[7] Borrell quoted in https://www.dw.com/en/eu-will-have-to-talk-to-taliban-but-wary-of-recognition/a-58890698 (17 August 2021).

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HANNA PFEIFER // ANNA GEIS //
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THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION, ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS, AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

What are the societal and political consequences of the recognition of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) in the context of asymmetric conflicts? Based on a discussion of diverse contemporary examples the three authors present the state of research on recognition dynamics. They shed light on the ambivalences of recognition practises and "thick recognition" in asymmetric conflicts, revealing dilemmas and unintended consequences. They recommend further empirical research and knowledge transfer among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers to better understand the dynamics and draw benefits for international security and conflict management.

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