

On the Complexity of Analyzing Armed Opposition: Objectives, Labeling, and Reflections on Ethiopia's Somali Region

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, a significant number of armed conflicts have taken place in Africa. Most of these conflicts have occurred within states and many African governments have faced opposition movements resorting to violence and armed struggle.

However, the political claims and trajectories of armed opposition groups have differed to a large degree in relation to their distinct political contexts. While some have become considerably apolitical over time, others have sought to live up to their initially-stated ideologies and objectives. Moreover, the often complex, disputed, and fragmented nature of the leaderships of armed opposition organizations in Africa tends to mask their ultimate political objectives, which are usually difficult to pinpoint.

This article presents a selection of tentative findings from a study on armed opposition groups in the greater Horn of Africa. Focusing on the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Ethiopia, it highlights the problems associated with determining the political objectives of armed opposition organizations, as well as the difficulties associated with labeling such groups. The article argues that denominating rebel groups as “terrorist” serves to justify certain approaches towards them, while categorizing them as “secessionist” may not be analytically useful and may also indicate a possible political bias by creating a social boundary that can be used to justify particular policies towards the designated “other”.

Keywords: Armed Opposition; Terrorism; Secessionism; Ethiopia; Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF)

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Introduction: Armed Opposition and Separatism in Africa

The end of the Cold War was marked by an increase in armed conflicts in Africa. This situation, which some have described as “new barbarism”¹ resulting in “new wars”,² was due to a number of factors. Central to them was the general weakening of the state in Africa, which was now largely deprived of external material and military assistance. In these circumstances, the “internal” conflicts became increasingly pronounced, as the weakening, and at times collapsing, states gave way to localized authorities, and non-state armed forces began to exert coercive power. Since the mid-1990s, however, the number of intrastate armed conflicts in Africa has been in moderate decline, and this tendency is expected to continue, at least in the near future.³

There are several hundred armed opposition groups in the world today. Africa alone played host to more than two hundred during the 1995-2005 period.⁴ However, their motivations and objectives are highly diverse. At present, according to some sources, approximately 171 of these movements can be considered as significant nationalist-separatist organizations.⁵ At least thirty, or possibly as many as fifty, of them are found in Africa (depending on the chosen classification criteria). This is hardly surprising since the continent hosts the largest regional concentration of so-called weak and failed states, which often exhibit little capacity or political will to deal comprehensively and constructively with armed or non-armed opposition.

A great number of African states are characterized by arbitrarily drawn borders and boundaries, often relating back to the colonial period, which had a tendency to split ethnically affiliated groups and communities. Such boundaries often become central to the social order of borderlands that are often located at the geographic and social margins of states. At times, groups in such divided territories may harbor ethno-nationalist sentiments, which in turn can be at times harnessed to service particular political ideologies and objectives. The exploitation of these sentiments may take violent forms, which in particular tends to be the case with armed opposition and secessionist insurgencies in Africa.

Remarkably, however, and despite many ethnic communities being split by arbitrary borders, Africa has experienced relatively little separatism or secessionism.⁶ This is due, at least in part, to the particularly strong commitment

¹ Robert D. Kaplan, The Coming of Anarchy, *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994. URL: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1994/02/the-coming-anarchy/304670/?single_page=true

² See e.g. Mary Kaldor, *The New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999, and Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security* (Zed Books: London, 2001).

³ Jakkie Cilliers and Julia Schünemann, “The Future of Intrastate Conflict in Africa: More Violence or Greater Peace?” ISS paper 246 (2013), Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria. URL: <http://www.issafrica.org/uploads/Paper246.pdf>

⁴ Churchill Ewumbue-Monono, “Respect for International Humanitarian Law by Armed Non-State Actors in Africa”, *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 864 (2006): 905.

⁵ Philip G. Roeder, Secessionism, Institutions, and Change, *Ethnopolitics* 13, no. 1 (2014): 86.

⁶ This article uses the words “secessionist” and “separatist” interchangeably, as well as “armed opposition”, “rebels”, and “insurgents”.

by African governments to state sovereignty and territorial integrity, which, in turn, can be explained to some extent by the increased need for the governing elites of neighboring states to support each other in order to maintain the *status quo* in the absence of strong outside support in the period following the end of the Cold War. Partly due to this reason, secessionists have been largely unsuccessful in forging new internationally recognized states.⁷ In fact, despite South Sudan's recent internationally recognized secession, which internationalized the poorly demarcated colonial boundary between north and south Sudan, separatist movements have experienced a general decline since the 1990s when the end of the Cold War had weakened a number of superpower client states.

This article offers some preliminary research results with reference to armed opposition groups in the greater Horn of Africa. It calls for a nuanced approach to analyzing armed opposition movements, in particular their development and objectives. The article questions the utility of strict labeling and warns against resorting to political bias in academic research. It seeks to demonstrate that the concept of "terrorism" has been used to create social boundaries between "me" and the "other" and to justify certain approaches and policies directed against opposition movements, while also indicating that labeling groups as "secessionist" or "separatist" can have similar effects. More specifically, the article traces the historical trajectory of the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) and focuses on key time periods in order to try to understand factionalism and political objectives with respect to secessionism on the part of its leadership. The analysis indicates that the ONLF does not fully conform to the dichotomous, secessionist/non-secessionist, labeling of such movements and cautions against such scholarly approach.

Armed Opposition and Secessionism

Scholars have dedicated a good deal of effort to the study of rebel movements. Despite this, there appears to be a dearth of major studies that consistently examine the issue of how to overcome the "collective action" problem in the mobilization of armed opposition. Instead, most of the literature covering the theoretical aspects of mobilization has focused on non-armed protest movements, opposition, and demonstrations.⁸

In addition, although research has dealt with insurgent movements, it has tended to engage in an effort to label and categorize them. These categorizations frequently include labels such as "secessionist/separatist", "revolutionary", or "terrorist". However, such practice, i.e. separating organizations in terms of what

⁷ Pierre Englebort, *Africa: Unity, Sovereignty, and Sorrow* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009), and Pierre, Englebort and Rebecca Hummel, Let's Stick Together: Understanding Africa's Secessionist Deficit, *African Affairs* 104, no. 416 (2005): 399-427.

⁸ See an excellent review of these theories and an attempt to build a new theoretical framework in Karl-Dieter Opp, *Theories of Political Protest and Social Movements: A Multidisciplinary Introduction, Critique, and Synthesis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

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are perceived to be their political objectives, can be regarded as being relatively artificial since the distinction is often not particularly clear-cut. Not only do these organizations develop, evolve, grow stronger or weaken, over time, but they also tend to have complicated leadership structures in which individuals often express differing political objectives. The movements tend to have distinct leadership factions, at times with different political objectives, which often surface particularly when they are under strain, lack resources, or face high coercive pressure from states security forces.

Moreover, it is not uncommon for a rebel movement to show strong separatist inclinations at one point in time, but later for this to change, depending on the relative strength and influence of leadership factions, particularly in cases of prolonged armed struggle. Furthermore, the most salient objectives of a movement may change over time, for instance between secession and revolution. As a result, it is difficult to categorize such organizations as separatist or non-separatist.

Secondly, the academic utility of separating armed opposition movements based on their political objectives, and the associated bias that arises from labeling such movements, is open to question. On the one hand, the strict labeling of movements not only predisposes research to a certain viewpoint, which may alienate it from objectivity, but it also obstructs a more nuanced approach for instance to the already difficult task of discovering the true motivations of armed opposition leaderships. On the other hand, the difficulty in determining the actual political objectives of each movement hinders any attempt to achieve a clear-cut categorization of them.

Moreover, such labeling may have little academic utility. Instead, it may serve the cause of political argumentation, framing, and determining policy approaches towards such movements. To an extent, this categorizing by academics may serve to create social boundaries between “me” and the “other” that can justify certain actions and policies by governments opposing such movements. In this way, research may become politicized by falling into the trap of legitimizing a particular position and approach towards armed opposition groups.

Indeed, although there have been a number of studies that have categorized movements as either separatist and non-separatist,⁹ there has been less focus on examining the distinct ideologies and political goals within their leadership cadres. This lack of nuanced analysis, accompanied with the broad labeling, obscures our understanding of the relative levels of separatism and the changes over time within and between these groups in Africa. While, for instance, Keller¹⁰ has recognized that the objectives of movements may change, he among others has insisted on

⁹ See e.g. Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (London: California University Press, 1985), Christopher Clapham, *African Guerrillas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), Englebert, *Africa*, and Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Edmond J. Keller, Secessionism in Africa, *The Journal of African Policy Studies* 13, no. 1 (2007). URL: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/keller/papers/SelectedPub/AfricaSecessionism.pdf>

categorizing some of them as secessionist. Forsberg¹¹ has looked at how ethnic groups may begin armed opposition with secessionist intentions, but does not consider any already existing armed opposition groups to see if they eventually become secessionist or intensify their already secessionist efforts. Nagle¹² has found that kin-states play a moderating role in affecting secessionist mobilization. However, recent scholarship has refrained from examining armed opposition leaderships closely, from emphasizing various distinct positions typically found among the leaders, as well as from examining the shifts in the orientation of the mainstream and factional groups in relation to different political objectives.

The moral difficulties associated with the categorizing and labeling of armed opposition groups can be observed in the ongoing scholarly debate on terrorism. The widely known phrase “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” highlights a similar dilemma, which has compounded the difficulty in defining terrorism.¹³ It points to the social construction of terrorism in the context of United States’ War on Terror as a dominant discourse in international politics from 2001 until recently. As Holland has noted,

... war on terror was especially reliant upon the framings of foreign policy discourse. After 9/11, considerable scope existed to define events [as terrorist], especially in an American context and for an American audience. The framing of particular identities, for example, was especially important ... [and] ... those who are able to [credibly] define what the crisis is all about hold the key to defining appropriate strategies to its resolution.¹⁴

This resembles the political use of the labeling of armed opposition movements, being it by denominating them as criminal, secessionist, revolutionary, or terrorist. For instance, the latest strand of economic theory in relation to civil wars has labeled armed opposition as largely criminal,¹⁵ despite many prominent scholars agreeing that, for instance, in Africa a number of contemporary states themselves can be considered as being repressive, criminal, and predatory.¹⁶ As a result, labeling armed opposition groups as terrorist or secessionist is inherently a state-centric approach

¹¹ Erika Forsberg, “Do Ethnic Dominoes Fall? Evaluating Domino Effects of Granting Territorial Concessions to Separatist Groups,” *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2013): 329-340.

¹² John Nagle, “Does Having a Kin State Lessen the Likelihood of Minorities Engaging in Secessionist Mobilization?: An Analysis of the Moderating Influence of Kin States,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 19, no. 3 (2013): 287-309.

¹³ Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, Jeroen Gunning, and Lee Jarvis, *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

¹⁴ Jack Holland, *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses After 9/11* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 16, 96.

¹⁵ Paul Collier, Rebellion as Quasi-Criminal Activity, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 44, no. 6 (2000): 839-853.

¹⁶ See e.g. Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis, and Béatrice Hibou, *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999); Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as a Political Instrument* (Oxford: James Currey, 1999).

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and dismisses insurgent movements without providing a deeper consideration of the possibility of there being morally legitimizing grievances and perceived injustices at the root of their struggles. This, of course, works against finding reasonable measures for conflict settlement and promoting durable long-term peace.

Thus, the implication of the above observations for scholarly work analyzing rebellions and armed groups is that academics should refrain from such labeling without proper justification in order to safeguard academic objectivity. The use of strict categorizations creates social and identity boundaries and can be questionable, as it may have severe consequences when applied in real world politics. Finally, the lack of a nuanced analysis is likely to promote superficial, or piecemeal, responses to armed conflicts that by and large cannot offer lasting solutions for sustainable peace.

Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front

The Ogaden consists of the main highlands covering the majority of the southeast territory of contemporary Ethiopia's Somali Region. Demographically, the area is predominantly Somali who are Muslims, consisting of a number of clans and sub-clans with the Ogadeni from Darod as the main group. Historical sources indicate that during the 13th and early 14th centuries, part of the Ogaden belonged to the Somali Ifat Sultanate, after which it was absorbed by the Adal Sultanate as a result of its wars against Abyssinia. In the late 19th century Menelik II conquered the area as part of his campaign to expand Ethiopia to the east.

By the end of the first two decades of the 20th century, Ethiopia had entered into treaties with Britain and Italy¹⁷, which led to the demarcation of its eastern borders with the British and Italian Somali colonies. This, in principle, formalized Ethiopia's control of the Ogaden although the Ethiopian state maintained little presence in the region. However, in 1930 Italy, which was seeking to gain economic control over Ethiopia, began its campaign of aggression by claiming territory from the Ogaden. This escalated into an international crisis that ended in the Italian conquest of most of Ethiopia. In 1941 Allied Forces liberated the country, reinstated Emperor Haile Selassie, and gradually allowed it to resume its full territorial independence.

However, after conquering Italian Somaliland and liberating Ethiopia, the British became inclined to agree with the pan-Somali idea of creating a Greater Somalia. They sought to join British and Italian Somaliland with the Ogaden as one entity.¹⁸ Yet, in the post-World War II geopolitical environment Britain was forced to cede the Hawd and Ogaden regions to Ethiopia, which the latter made an integral part of its territory despite the British insisting on autonomy for the Somali in Eastern Ethiopia.¹⁹

¹⁷ These were the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty (1897) and the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship (1928).

¹⁸ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (Oxford: James Currey, 1991), 180.

¹⁹ Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 106.

The first major contemporary armed opposition movements in Ethiopia emerged during the rule of Haile Selassie's imperial regime (1930-1974). The initial groups resisted Italian occupation, but later insurgencies were directed against the Selassie regime. It was during the latter stages of Haile Selassie's rule that discontent in some areas of Ethiopia reached the level that gave rise to organized armed opposition groups. In the 1960s, rebel movements became active in Eritrea (1963-1991) and Bale (1963-1970).²⁰ Although the Bale rebellion drew largely on the support of the country's Oromo majority population, it also counted on irredentist Somali support that viewed Bale as part of Greater Somalia.²¹

However, the Ogaden remained as the focal point of Somali-Ethiopian relations. The armed forces of the two states clashed on the border in 1963.²² However, it was only after the collapse of the imperial government in 1974, and even more so in response to the early repression and the "red terror" of the Derg regime, that armed opposition in the peripheries of the Ethiopian state strengthened considerably. For instance, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) emerged during this period and gained early external support from Sudan, among other states. Another example of this was the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), founded by Yusuf Dheere, which gained the blessing of the Siad Barre regime as it sought to use the turmoil in Ethiopia following the fall of Haile Selassie as the pretext for conquering the Ogaden. With Somali government support, the WSLF was able to gain control of most of the Ogaden by 1976, and in July 1977 was joined by the Somali army in an invasion that marked the beginning of the irredentist Ogaden War (1977-8). Yet, despite early Somali successes, Cuban-backed Ethiopian military prevailed and expelled the main Somali forces from the Ogaden in March 1978.

The collapse of the Derg in 1991 opened up a new political landscape in Ethiopia. It was at this time that the TPLF, the main party behind the regime's military defeat, assumed the prominent role as the main player in Ethiopian politics which it still holds today. Samatar²³ has argued that it was precisely this prominence that "...derailed the promise of an autonomous and legitimate local administration that could remedy past ailments". To extend its power, the TPLF formed a system of associated parties governing each major region in Ethiopia under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) umbrella, over which it exercised tight control.²⁴ It also created a system of satellite parties in other regions, which were not regarded as full members of the EPRDF.²⁵

²⁰ Another rebellion during this period took place in Gojjam (1968). See an excellent analysis on insurgencies from the period in Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest. Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century* (Asmara: Red Sea Press, 1996).

²¹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 216.

²² Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, 182.

²³ Abdi. I. Samatar, Ethiopian Federalism: Autonomy versus Control in the Somali Region, *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 6 (2004), 1133.

²⁴ This includes the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) in Oromia, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) administering the Amhara region, and the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Front (SEPDF) as the governing party in the Southern Region.

²⁵ These parties include the Afar National Democratic Party (former Afar People's Democratic Organization),

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The Ethiopian political system consists of nine federal regions that are considered to be ethnically defined. Four of these are governed by the four EPRDF parties, and the remaining five by those either founded or largely guided by it.²⁶ The TPLF has situated itself at the core of the political system as the most powerful party, and the highest leadership of each region is answerable to it, albeit to differing degrees. This, along with the tight control of the extensive and wide-reaching Ethiopian security apparatus, allows the TPLF to control the state's political system. However, the TPLF dictating the post-1991 political scene, has left little room and few options for opposition organizations. According to Samatar,²⁷ they have been left with a choice between trying to push for more power from within the system, or opting out and challenging the state by violent means.

The Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) is one such opposition movement. It was an outgrowth of the WSLF, the separatist rebel group fighting with Somali armed forces during the Ogaden war. After the war, the WSLF had remained as the main armed opposition organization in the Somali region, but during the course of the early 1980s it lost much of its strength and by 1989 it was largely defunct. In this situation, the ONLF emerged as the WSLF offshoot and was formally instituted in Kuwait on 15 August 1984 by six former WSLF leaders²⁸ with the main stated objective of gaining the full independence of the Somali Region²⁹ in eastern Ethiopia.³⁰ The formation of the ONLF was an attempt to form a political and military organization to cater to the ethno-nationalist interests of the Ogadeni, who considered that they were facing a repressive central government. The ONLF became active in 1988 and converted into the largest party in the region in the 1992 elections to the Interim Regional Assembly. It won some 70 of 110 available seats, while the WSLF took 10, and gained an absolute majority for the Ogaden clan in the Somali Regional Assembly, forming the first regional government.³¹

Self-determination features as the ONLF's main objective, and it has been vigorously pursued, largely irrespective of external factors affecting the politics of the Somali Region. For instance, it seems that the heightening prospects, and the eventual realization, of Eritrean independence in the course of 1991-3 had little effect

Somali People's Democratic Party, Hareri National League, Gambela People's Democratic Movement, and Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front.

²⁶ Paulos Chanie, "Clientelism and Ethiopia's post-1991 decentralisation," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 3 (2007): 355-384.

²⁷ Samatar, 'Ethiopian Federalism', 1135.

²⁸ The ONLF's founding members included Abdirahman Mahdi, the Chairman of the Western Somali Liberation Movement, Mohamed Ismail Omar, Sheikh Ibrahim Abdalla Mohamed, Abdi Ibrahim Ghehleh, Abdirahman Yusuf Magan, and the future first Somali regional president (1993), Abdulahi Muhammed Sa'adi, all leading members of the Somali opposition in the Western Somali Liberation Front/Movement (WSLF/M).

²⁹ Most of the territorial extension of the Somali Region can be considered as Ogaden.

³⁰ Institute for the Study of Violent Groups, "Ogaden National Liberation Front", University of New Haven, 2012. URL: http://vkb.isvg.org/Wiki/Groups/Ogaden_National_Liberation_Front - cite_note-2

³¹ See John Markakis, "The Somali in Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 23, no. 70 (1996): 567, and Asnake K. Adegehe, "Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study of the Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions" (PhD dissertation, Leiden University, Leiden, 2009), 135.

on strengthening the ONLF's call for self-determination. A more important factor appears to have been the disappointment of the regional elite with the lack of a dividend from the victorious war following the establishment of a central government and the collapse of the Mengistu regime. Similarly, neither oil prospecting and the subsequent plans for its extraction in the Somali Region, nor the lack of external support seem to have significantly altered the mainstream ONLF's call for self-determination.

The ONLF's major shortcoming has been to insist on its genealogical origins as being Ogadeni.³² This sub-clan based definition has limited acceptance among other groups in the clan system in the Somali Region, while it is also the case that some Ogadeni are excluded. From early on, limited popular support restricted the ONLF's appeal, and to a large extent prevented it from gaining dominance in regional politics despite claiming to represent the whole region. After the fall of the Derg in 1991, the newly instituted TPLF/EPRDF central government was also quick to recognize the limits of the ONLF's acceptability among some of the non-Ogadeni groups, and used this as a political lever for weakening the movement by supporting rival groups and individuals in the region. This became particularly apparent when the new government sought to centralize power in order to consolidate its rule and after the ONLF's separatist tendencies became increasingly apparent by the mid-90s.

Part of the new government's strategic approach was to undermine the power of regionalist parties. In the Somali Region, the administration rewarded local authorities that were loyal to it, especially in order to bind the region to the political center. This was considered as especially important because the Somali Region is seen as being easily influenced by Somalia. In addition, the region's leading political opposition force, the ONLF, had maintained strong ties with the earlier Somali regime, and, during the war, had never formed part of the EPRDF armed opposition coalition in which the TPLF was the strongest party. As a result, when the ONLF became the main authority in Eastern Ethiopia in the early post-1991 situation, the central administration feared that the inability to build solid ties with the political leadership of the region would risk the necessity of making political concessions and lead to possible secession. It made an explicit effort to include rival Somali representatives in the July 1991 Democratic and Peaceful Transitional Conference³³ in order to counter the ONLF refusal to participate in the new government and its calls for self-determination and secession from Ethiopia.³⁴ The government's fear was further fed by the ONLF's victory in regional elections and the subsequent control of the administration under the regional president, Abdulahi Muhammed Saadi. After the ONLF moved to call for a referendum to decide the status of the Somali Region, the central government began substituting those members of the regional parliament it deemed secessionist with those loyal to the central administration.³⁵

³² See e.g. Samatar, *Ethiopian Federalism*, 1137.

³³ John Markakis, "The Somali in the New Political Order of Ethiopia," *Review of African Political Economy* 21, no. 59 (1994): 71-2.

³⁴ Samatar, 'Ethiopian Federalism', 1135.

³⁵ Minorities at Risk, "Chronology for Somalis in Ethiopia," 2010. URL: <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/>

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The efforts to undermine the ONLF by the TPLF/EPRDF-dominated federal government were successful to the extent that they increased central government control of the region's political institutions. By 1994, the EPRDF's action in withholding the spoils of the national cake had generated discontent among the ONLF leadership cadres, which declared their continued commitment to pushing for regional self-determination. But a number of other Somali groups denounced the ONLF's separatism stance and continued to work with the central government, which accommodated them by forming the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL) as a regional EPRDF satellite party. This strategy, which sought to quell the ONLF's calls for self-determination by undermining its position in regional politics, had been in the making since 1992. Subsequently, the ESDL was portrayed as being an inclusive pan-Somali group, which included a number of clan-based organizations, as opposed to the ONLF, which continued to be based heavily on sections of the Ogaden sub-clan.³⁶ Some of these elements, believing that the ONLF could not be held back from expressing its reinvigorated calls for self-determination, and possibly seeking to strengthen their own position, encouraged the ONLF to increasingly enter into confrontation with the central government. Eventually, the organization's dominant position led to the government of the Somali Region accepting the quest for self-determination by forming a committee that would negotiate with the central government authorities. This indicates that not only did the ONLF's calls for self-determination change in intensity over time, but that the post-1991 political landscape of the Somali Region was highly complex and divided without a clear overwhelming authority that could command wide legitimacy. The increasing competition and confrontation between the strongest parties, the central government and the ONLF, further complicated the landscape of regional politics.

By the mid-90s, the rift between the ONLF's and the ESDL's perception of the constitutional right to secession had generated a crisis in the Somali regional administration. While at this point the ONLF leadership was relatively uniform in interpreting the Transitional Charter, and Article 39 of the current FDRE Constitution, as providing the *de jure* right to secede (and some continue to do so today), a number of ESDL representatives appeared to be more realistic about its *de facto* limits in post-Derg Ethiopia. The rift within the Somali regional administration conformed to the EPRDF agenda to extend its influence in the region in order to quell calls for self-determination, particularly after the recent secession of Eritrea.

The TPLF leadership maintained a distinct relationship with associated and non-collaborating parties.³⁷ For instance, it saw the ONLF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in a different light. The TPLF considered the EPLF as

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³⁶ Adegehe, 'Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia', 138.

³⁷ The TPLF itself began as a separatist organization and only later converted into a principally reformist movement. This led to its contradictory position of promoting self-determination, but internally within a federal all-Ethiopian government. See Clapham, *African Guerrillas*, 6-7.

having played a vital role in the survival of its insurgency early on, and as having made a significant contribution to the EPRDF coalition's victory over the Derg.³⁸ Given Eritrea's history of breached autonomous status and the EPLF's inclination to continue fighting for independence, the TPLF was left with little choice but to comply with Eritrean secession.³⁹ Otherwise, given the EPLF's coercive strength, the TPLF could have risked its own position as the dominant party in the making of post-Derg Ethiopia. Indeed, it was mainly the EPLF's history and relationship with the TPLF, coupled with its military strength, which fulfilled both the constitutional *de jure* and political *de facto* conditions allowing Eritrea to gain independence. With TPLF blessing, the international recognition of Eritrea then became possible despite the Organization of African Unity's commitment to the existing borders and the international community's general inclination not to recognize secession.

The TPLF approach towards the ONLF differed. This was particularly the case after Eritrean independence when some other parties blamed the TPLF for allowing disintegration of Ethiopia. There had been relatively little collaboration between the TPLF and the ONLF, even though the ONLF had engaged in cooperation with the EPRDF in order to defeat the Derg. In addition, the TPLF was wary of the ONLF's ties with Somalia and the related irredentism. The fear was that the self-determination stand could result in outright secession, or at a minimum Ogaden moving closer to Somalia, unless strong ties between the central government and the Somali Region minority groups were forged. From the central government's point of view the ONLF and the Somali Region failed both the *de jure* and *de facto* tests for independence, and it took measures to maintain this situation by strengthening its grip on regional politics.

It can be concluded from the above discussion that the trajectory of the TPLF/EPRDF-ONLF relationship explains, to a significant extent, the periodic intensification and weakening of secessionism among the ONLF leadership. This serves as a powerful argument against some of the other theories that claim to explain the increasing levels of secessionism, such as the one that argues that the presence of controllable natural resources in the state's territory, as well as other economic opportunities, to act as the driving forces behind the move towards armed opposition.⁴⁰ Similarly, the scenario where an increase in secessionist pressure comes about because of the homogeneous ethnic population structure in a given region, but different compared with the rest of the state,⁴¹ hardly applies to the Somali Region. This is because it has a highly diverse demographic structure, not

³⁸ See Charles G. Thomas, "The Aberration of Eritrean Secession, 1961-1993" (Master's Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2011).

³⁹ Ulrich Schneckener and Stefan Wolff. *Managing and Settling Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives on Successes and Failures in Europe, Africa and Asia* (London: C. Hurst, 2004), 186.

⁴⁰ Pavkovic and Radan have summed up the main arguments associated with the economic theory that attempts to explain secessionism. See Aleksander Pavkovic and Peter Radan. *Creating New States: Theory and Practice of Secession* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007): 188-90.

⁴¹ Schneckener and Wolff, *Managing and Settling Ethnic Conflicts*.

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only among the local Somali clans and sub-clans but also including non-Somali minorities. Although the movements in the region tend to create separate loyalties, they hardly ever command acceptance and legitimacy among the vast majority of the regional population which also the Ethiopian governments have sought to prevent.

As Keller⁴² emphasizes when referring in general to armed opposition movements, the ONLF rebellion was conditioned by the central government's policy and the measures the TPLF/EPRDF imposed after taking power. For instance, due to the central government's position, the negotiations on self-determination of the Somali Region called for by the ONLF never materialized. The TPLF-led government rejected the proposed meeting with an ONLF-directed committee mandated by the Somali regional government to negotiate the possibility and terms of secession. Instead, the federal authorities convened a parliamentary session to inform the Somali regional authorities about the unconstitutional nature of any move towards secession. The regional Somali committee never attended the proceedings, but the elected president of the Somali Regional Government, Hassan Jireh Qalinle, did. A less militant Ogadeni than many other ONLF members, and affiliated with the revived elements of the WSLF that the central government had backed as a counterforce to the ONLF, he was told in Addis Ababa that the proposal for self-determination was illegal, a position which he subsequently communicated to the regional committee. This led to an outrage among the ONLF leadership and resulted in Qalinle being sacked in April 1994, and his deputy resigning in protest.⁴³

After the more radical section of the ONLF leadership committed itself to seeking outright secession, the relationship with the central government quickly deteriorated. Fourteen other politically active clan-based organizations in the region condemned secessionism and continued to collaborate with the central government. The EPRDF's political support to these ONLF rival factions culminated in the 1995 regional election in which its regional ally, the ESDL, consisting of a number of inter-clan alliances, defeated the ONLF by gaining over half of the 139 seats available in the regional parliament.⁴⁴ Although the mainstream ONLF boycotted the election, an offshoot faction that denounced violence participated in it with poor result.⁴⁵

Since the 1995 election, the ESDL, adopting a more moderate approach by working through the state institutions, has maintained a potent constituency in the region. Competition against the ESDL has had an effect on the leaderships of the ONLF and the WSLF, with one faction of the former and most of the latter joining it.⁴⁶ In this respect the ONLF has suffered, at least to an extent, from a generational

⁴² Keller, *Secessionism in Africa*.

⁴³ Samatar, *Ethiopian Federalism*, 1140.

⁴⁴ Sources differ slightly on the number of seats gained by the ESDL. According to Adegehe, 'Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia', from a possible 138 seats, the organization gained 75, while Tobias Hagmann and Mohamad H.Khalif, *State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991*, *Bildhaan: The International Journal of Somali Studies* 6 (2006): 29 claim the number to be 76.

⁴⁵ Adegehe, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia*, 138.

⁴⁶ Hagmann and Khalif, *State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991*, 29.

divide between the older more radical secessionist leaders and the younger more moderate members willing to work within the state's political structures.

After early 1994, following the ONLF's stated commitment to secession, the conflict in the Somali Region escalated. The radical section of the ONLF leadership decided to intensify its armed activities in order to achieve the stated objective, while the central government actively engaged in a political and military counterinsurgency campaign. This led to political instability and continuing protracted violence in the Somali Region, which had largely to do with the central government's attempt to extend its influence and tie the Somali territories increasingly to the Ethiopian state. Elements of this policy, driven in part by Somalia's and Eritrea's separatist influence in the region, were the strategic removal, substitution, and reinstatement of regional parliament representatives according to the interests of the central government, and the intense support of those organizations collaborating with it. The region was subjected to tight administrative and coercive control, in which the state's security apparatus, specifically the army and the police, have played a major role since.

During the second part of the decade, the armed conflict intensified. In the course of 1996, Minorities at Risk reported military confrontations between security forces and ONLF guerrillas, and that the government forces had killed civilians.⁴⁷ Allegedly, arbitrary arrests, long detentions without prosecution, disappearances, torture, and executions of those who sided with the secessionists have continued to take place since that time.⁴⁸ In response to the government measures, the ONLF began coordinating activities with other armed opposition groups with a similar agenda. To this end, it concluded agreements with the Oromo Liberation Front and the Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front. The central government responded by increasingly concentrating the focus of its security apparatus on the respective regions, and began labeling such groups as "terrorist". Its counterinsurgency measures, ostensibly carried out without a full knowledge of who exactly supported the armed opposition, complicated the situation.⁴⁹

In 1998 the ONLF fragmented even further, but this did little to quell the violence. Although some more moderate ONLF leaders decided to end their support for the armed struggle and merge with the ESDL, the ESDL itself was in disarray because it had been unable to prevent violence and military escalation in the region and had simultaneously lost EPRDF support.⁵⁰ In June 1998, the mainstream ESDL

⁴⁷ Minorities at Risk. "Chronology for Somalis in Ethiopia." Minorities at Risk, 2010.

⁴⁸ Mohamud H. Khalif and Martin Doornbos, "The Somali Region in Ethiopia: A Neglected Human Rights Tragedy", *Review of African Political Economy* 29, no. 91 (2003): 73-94. See also Human Rights Watch, "Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State" (Report, Berlin, June 2008).

⁴⁹ In fact, it is difficult to determine who sympathizes with the armed opposition, as the Ogadeni themselves have been divided between those who support the central government and those who represent a constituency in support of the ONLF; at times, the division occurs even at the level of the family. See Tobias Hagmann, "Beyond Clannishness and Colonialism: Understanding Political Disorder in Ethiopia's Somali Region, 1991-2004," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, no. 4 (2005): 525.

⁵⁰ Hagmann and Khalif, *State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991*, 30.

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and the ONLF splinter group founded the Somali People's Democratic Party. Yet, this did little to de-escalate the violence because the onset of the Eritrean-Ethiopian war in May further destabilized the Somali Region. In part due to Eritrea's active logistical and military support, as well as training, the ONLF insurgency intensified, while the ONLF moved to Eritrea and continued to use it as a sanctuary even after the war.⁵¹

The September 11th attacks on the United States (US) in 2001 had an indirect impact on Ethiopia's Somali Region as well. The subsequent launching of the US global War on Terror (WoT) transformed Ethiopia from collaborating partner into an indispensable US ally in the Horn of Africa. From then onwards US policy appears to have penetrated the Ethiopian administration, at least in the case of confronting "terrorism". The US and TPLF interests coincide on a number of fronts, particularly in relation to stabilizing the peripheral territories and borderlands in the Horn, with both partners seeking to fight "terrorism" and extend their influence in the sub-region.

Within this context, the Ethiopian government intensified its counterinsurgency campaigns against domestic armed opposition groups, by now frequently referring to them as "terrorist". For instance, in 2004-2006, the government engaged in the second wave of military offensives in the Somali Region in an effort to end the ONLF insurgency. By this time, it had become apparent that the ONLF had been receiving support from Eritrea and Somalia, which was a major factor behind the Ethiopian government's decision to initiate a military campaign in Somalia in July 2006.⁵² Described as an attempt to back up the Somali Transitional Federal Government in the face of a "terrorist" Islamic Court Union, the military intervention served the broader US WoT objectives as well as Ethiopia's attempt to pacify the Somali Region by force, while it was also likely linked to the Ethiopian government's economic aspirations, including oil and mineral extraction, in the region.

Further intensification of the conflict in Eastern Ethiopia followed. On 24 April 2007, it was reported that the ONLF had attacked a Chinese-run oil exploration camp in Abole, and killed a number of Chinese and more than 60 Ethiopian workers.⁵³ After a series of rebel offensives in the Somali Region, hard government counterinsurgency measures were launched. The New York Times reported that this campaign resulted in villages being attacked and burned, the denial of access to wells, and a blockade on all commercial traffic, all of which hindered survival of the local population and resulted in forced displacement.⁵⁴ In 2008, the government established the regional Liyu police force, recruiting among Ogadeni youth to counter the ONLF, which

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, *Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State*, 30.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, *Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State*, 30.

⁵³ See e.g. Adegehe, *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia*, 141, and Jeffrey Gettleman, *In Ethiopia, Fear and Cries of Army Brutality*, *The New York Times*, 18 June 2007. URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/18/world/africa/18ethiopia.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁵⁴ Gettleman, *In Ethiopia, Fear and Cries of Army Brutality*.

turned the conflict increasingly into an intra-Ogadeni affair. Actions by the Liyu police have since generated controversy due to the reported use of rape, torture, and arbitrary executions, along with other harsh measures, against sections of the local population.⁵⁵

The new crackdown, accompanied by the intervention in Somalia, came as an unprecedented blow to the ONLF. The measures taken not only affected the group on Ethiopian soil, but also undermined its rearguard bases in Somalia and sought to end the assumed Eritrean support channeled through Somalia. The intensified efforts to eliminate the ONLF played a role in creating further divisions within its leadership. In January 2009, Ethiopian security forces located and killed one of the leading ONLF members, the group's representative in foreign relations, Mohamed Sirad Dolal, near Denan. Some believe that the movement's chairman, Mohamed Omar Osman, was behind the killing in order to prevent Dolal threatening his own position. This incident caused a rift between some leading senior members of the movement, with Abdiwali Hussein Gas suspecting Osman. As a result, he sought to sideline Osman by declaring Salahudin Abdurahman Maaow as the new ONLF chairman.

Losing Dolal was a heavy loss to the organization because he had extensive influence on the ground, and had been leading one of its most potent fighting forces. Dolal had also secured external support for the ONLF and apparently forged personal ties with leaders of the United Western Somali Liberation Front (UWSLF, the former Al-Itihad) in Somalia, which had regrouped, re-strengthened, and re-entered the Somali Region. Part of the ONLF leadership regarded the UWSLF as a rival group competing for the allegiances of the people of the Somali Region, and the threat it and Dolal's ascendancy within the ONLF pose to chairman Osman is why some leaders hold him responsible for Dolal and five other leaders falling into the hands of the Ethiopian army. Dolal's death led to a factional rift in the ONLF, with a number of leaders defecting in the course of 2009. Abdiwali Hussein Gas and Salahudin Abdurahman Maaow founded their own group, with the latter as chairman. However, its legitimacy on the ground has been questioned.

On 28 August 2009, Ethiopia passed an Anti-Terrorism Proclamation.⁵⁶ It awarded wide powers to the state's administrative and security apparatuses, empowering them to act upon suspicion of any possible "terrorist" activity. The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation has enabled justification of the use of security apparatus and judicial system against critics whenever it has been deemed necessary. In September 2011, the Ethiopian government slapped terrorism charges on, and subsequently imprisoned, two Swedish journalists who had entered the Somali Region illegally in

⁵⁵ William Lloyd George, 'Ethiopia's special police seek to build trust after rights abuse claims', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2013. URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/jul/17/ethiopia-police-liyu-abuse-claims>

⁵⁶ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, *Anti-Terrorism Proclamation*, Proclamation No. 652/2009, 28 August. URL: <http://www.mfa.gov.et/docs/Anti-Terrorism%20Proclamation.pdf>

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order to make a documentary about the ONLF and the region.⁵⁷ In its 2013 report, Amnesty International claimed that in June the Ethiopian state used anti-terrorism legislation to charge and imprison a United Nations employee who had engaged in negotiations with the ONLF for the release of two abducted World Food Program workers, while also mentioning numerous other accounts of the application of the anti-terrorism legislation being used to silence opposition.⁵⁸

The passing of anti-terrorism legislation placed increasing pressure on armed opposition groups in the Somali Region. The UWSLF had begun negotiating with the government soon after Dolal's death, partly because it had alienated the group from the ONLF. Dolal's personal ties with the UWSLF chairman, Sheik Abdurahim Mohammed Hussein, had enabled the latter to collaborate with the ONLF but, after the loss of this connection, the UWSLF was forced to weigh up its strategic options as a relatively small player with few alliances in the Somali Region. Consequently, it entered into negotiations with the Ethiopian government, which led to a peace treaty signed in August 2010. While the UWSLF agreed to abandon its armed struggle, the Ethiopian government promised "to grant [an] amnesty to all leaders and prisoners" and "to rehabilitate and integrate [the] Front's soldiers in to the community".⁵⁹

In addition, the Ethiopian government announced that it was about to reach a peace agreement with the ONLF. However, soon after, the ONLF issued a statement refuting the claim. In its communiqué the ONLF stated that the UWSLF peace agreement had no significant impact on the situation in the Somali Region, and that by negotiating with an offshoot group, the Ethiopian government had sought to fabricate the impression of a peace process when none actually existed.⁶⁰ Yet, subsequently in October 2010, a breakaway group consisting of a handful of prominent ONLF individuals led by Maaow signed a peace treaty with the Ethiopian government in Washington, DC. It agreed to lay down arms in order to secure the development of the Somali Region and work within the constitutional framework of Ethiopia. This, in practice, meant that the individuals agreeing to peace had abandoned the secessionist struggle. The ONLF under Osman rejected the peace deal, stating that Maaow had been expelled from the movement years before, due to charges of embezzlement.⁶¹

⁵⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation, Swedish journalists tell of time in Ethiopia jail, 16 October 2012. URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19960209>

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2013: The State of the World's Human Rights", London, 94-97.

⁵⁹ Reliefweb, Ethiopia: Ethiopian Gov't, UWSLF Sign Peace Deal, 2 August 2010. URL: <http://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-ethiopian-govt-uwslf-sign-peace-deal>. There has been speculation about the UWSLF's decision to agree to peace, with suggestions that it might have been a tactical maneuver. See e.g. The Karamarda Group, "UWSLF: A Genuine Truce for Peace or Tactical Maneuver for Surrender to Ethiopia?," June 2010. URL: http://www.wardheernews.com/Articles_2010/June/Karamarda/UWSLF-final.pdf

⁶⁰ Tesfa-Alem Tekle, Ethiopia Claims It Will Sign Peace Deal with Separatist Ogaden Rebels, Sudan Tribune, 21 August 2010. URL: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article36019>

⁶¹ Barry Malone, Ethiopia signs peace deal with Ogaden rebel faction, Reuters, 12 October 2010. URL: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2010/10/12/ethiopia-rebels-ogaden-idUKLDE69B21W20101012>

Finally, the ONLF's weakness is due, to an extent, to the intensification of the counterinsurgency campaign after 2007. Since then, the group has lost a large part of its external support, some of its key leaders, and has been militarily stretched. The ONLF's ability to survive has been undermined by the lack of incoming resources, particularly from among the diaspora which appears increasingly keen on peace and investing in the Somali Region. However, it has remained active despite many Ogadeni denouncing it and its violent tactics.⁶² Yet, as the example of the Maaow group demonstrates, the leadership divisions have led to some prominent ONLF individuals' being inclined to seek a settlement to the conflict within the current institutional framework of the Ethiopian state and accept an agreement which is short of secession.

In the end, as the above discussion indicates, observing the development of the ONLF since 2007 is informative regarding our ability to pinpoint the changing objectives in relation to armed opposition leadership. While the ONLF hardliner Osman appears to remain as the mainstream leader of the movement, some more moderate and often younger members have shown inclination to abandon the armed struggle and give up the objectives of secession and full independence for promises of improved administration in and for the region, peace, and development. This points to internal complexity associated with the leadership of rebel movements and their changing agendas and objectives, which in turn cautions against them being labeled strictly as either secessionist or non-secessionist. The implications of such a categorization are likely much more far-reaching than simply the reality surrounding any particular insurgent group and its relationship with the central government.

Concluding Remarks

This article has attempted to deal with two major issues. It has sought to alarm about the dangers associated with the labeling of armed opposition movements, and has highlighted the difficulty of analyzing the political motivations and objectives of the leaderships of armed opposition groups.

Firstly, the article has argued that the labeling of armed opposition groups as "terrorist", "secessionist", or otherwise is both politically biased and tends to have little academic value. Although the term "terrorist" has a long history, the US global WoT accelerated the tendency to use this otherwise ill-defined concept and apply it to a wide variety of actors engaging in anti-state activities. In the case of Ethiopia, this trend can be observed in the promulgation of the anti-terrorism legislation and the state referring to certain opposition and its activities categorically as "terrorism". The subsequent abovementioned measures adopted by the Ethiopian government serve as an example of some of the possible political consequences of this labeling. It should be emphasized that similarly the use of the term "secessionist" has moral

⁶² Human Rights Watch, *Collective Punishment: War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in the Ogaden area of Ethiopia's Somali Regional State*, 28.

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implications that may be used by a state to justify policies directed against armed and non-armed opposition groups.

Therefore, this article has cautioned against the extensive academic practice of labeling and strictly categorizing armed opposition movements according to their perceived objectives. It is clear that many such judgments are made by examining groups from afar or without a nuanced analysis of their leadership power centers and factions. This can affect the level of objectivity and indicate some scholars' state-centric bias, but even more importantly allow the justification of certain approaches and policies towards an opposition group while simultaneously serving to de-legitimize it.

Secondly, as the case of the ONLF shows, the reality of armed opposition leadership is complex. An accurate picture is not easily captured by recourse to strict categorizations, which tend to prevent a more sophisticated inquiry into their motivations and objectives. The leaderships of rebel groups tend to be composed of a number of individuals with distinct approaches, agendas, motivations, and objectives. Occasionally the differences that emerge as a result of evolving perspectives, or changes in objectives, result in factionalism and, over time, groups breaking away from the mainstream organizations. In relation to the ONLF, among other factors, this appears to have owed much to the strains caused by government crackdowns and the generational divide. As the case of the ONLF further shows, periods of extreme hardship have placed particular stress on the leadership and have tested its coherence. Often, such periods lead to divisions, splits, and offshoots from the main movement.

In sum, due to the above reasons, this article calls for a more nuanced approach when analyzing armed opposition movements. It is clear that by observing these groups from a distance it is not possible to conduct a detailed analysis. It is also the case that distance observation negates justification for labeling and characterizing such groups. This argues strongly in favor of academics avoiding falling into the normative trap of labeling groups as, for instance, "criminal", "terrorist", "secessionist", or "revolutionary", since it creates a certain image that may have grave political real-life implications affecting state policies, as well as political and armed conflicts. Instead, research into armed opposition organizations should entail a more nuanced analysis, free of strict labels, which focuses their development and historical trajectories, leadership structures and power centers (factions), as well as changes in the objectives of leadership poles and factions. This would enable us to look beyond classic, repressive, and often unfruitful security approaches when confronting armed opposition groups, and encourage a consideration of more productive policies aimed at addressing the grievances that lie behind such rebellions. Most likely, this would enable us to go beyond conventional approaches and provide us with the opportunity to design policies that may lead to truly comprehensive settlements as a starting point for building sustainable long-term peace.

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