

# Centre for the Study of Armed Groups

2020–2022 Report

**Centre on Armed Groups**  
Research. Dialogue. Advice.

# Founding and incubation

The Centre on Armed Groups evolved out of a programme, the Centre for the Study of Armed Groups, founded in June 2020 and hosted at ODI, a leading London-based think-tank. This report summarizes our activities during 2020–2022, before establishing the Centre as an independent organization.

## Objectives

The Centre for the Study for Armed Groups aimed to be a resource for governments, researchers, and aid actors grappling with the challenges of understanding and engaging with armed groups. The Centre addressed these challenges by providing rigorous analysis and original research. During this period, the Centre did this through:

- **Undertaking original fieldwork and direct engagement** with armed groups and those that live under their control, that sheds light on how to engage with and influence them
- **Fostering exchange, collaboration, and dialogue** between researchers, scholars, and practitioners in contexts and across traditional disciplinary dividing lines

- **Engaging policymakers** to address policy issues and the on-the-ground dilemmas posed by engagement with armed groups

## Funding and partners

During this incubation period, our donors included the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Government of the Netherlands, the Norwegian Refugee Council, Interpeace, USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office. We also established a number of research partnerships, including with GPPI, the International Centre for Tax and Development (ICTD), and Interpeace, among others. Our research and staffing budget averaged around \$250,000 per year.

# Research outputs and impact

## Research

During this two-year period, the Centre focused on two interrelated research streams.

### **Research Stream 1: Rethinking civilian-armed group relations**

The relationship between civilians and armed groups is often thought of in terms of coercion, resistance, victimization, and violence. Yet we know that many armed groups expend considerable resources and efforts engaging with civilians in ways that are not strictly coercive, as we saw with various armed groups capitalizing on COVID-19.

Civilian-insurgent relationships are often far more complex than how they are typically represented. Seemingly powerless civilians can exert influence over armed groups in unpredictable ways, and the civilian-armed group relationship has a significant yet often overlooked – impact on conflict.

This research stream examined civilian-armed relations across various contexts, seeking to redefine our understanding of civilian agency in the context of violence and contested state-building. We looked at armed group political orders, seeking to understand the methodologies and techniques various armed groups use to influence civilian behavior.

This work also examined civilian agency and influence through original empirical work on civilian behavior, including online and on social media, and survival strategies. Seeking to challenge conventional understanding of civilian agency, this strand foregrounded civilian perspectives on and engagement with armed groups, which are often neglected in the study of conflict. It drew comparative lessons from various types of armed groups. Finally, we examined the policy implications and operational impact of relevant protection, humanitarian, development, political, and peacebuilding interventions through a series of editorials, analysis pieces, and public and private events.

## Research Stream 2: Understanding armed group economies

While armed groups are often associated with illicit economies, extortion and other extra-legal revenue generation, we know surprisingly little about what influences armed group economic activity – and precisely what impact armed groups have on the broader economy. Significant work has been done on illicit economies, informal taxation, and related themes, yet flawed assumptions about armed groups' involvement prevail. This stream focuses on understanding armed group economies from multiple angles.

The first looked at armed group taxation practices and the factors influencing how, who, and what they extract revenue from. This work drew on the Centre's ongoing partnership with the International Centre for Tax and Development (ICTD) at the Institute of Development Studies, and on ODI's extensive research on tax, laying the groundwork for a multi-year research program.

Our research showed that taxation is a significant source of income for armed groups. However, taxation is not only about generating revenue. In addition, taxation enables armed groups to reinforce their ideology, project authority, develop institutions, and build legitimacy. This makes taxation a powerful tool for exercising control over civilian populations.

The second strand examined the links between armed groups and the broader spectrum of economic actors including,

the state, the business community, and customary authorities. This work fed into an edited volume on smuggling. This stream also informed policy interventions to counter armed group economic activities via several public and private events and analytical pieces.

## Outputs

### Key research publications

Ashley Jackson and Florian Weigand (2020) Rebel rule of law: Taliban courts in the west and north-west of Afghanistan. Working Paper

Florian Weigand (2020): Conflict and Transnational Crime: Bullets, Borders, and Business in Southeast Asia, Edward Elgar Publishing

Jonathan Somer and Ezequiel Heffes (2020) Inviting non-state armed groups to the table: Inclusive strategies towards a more fit for purpose international humanitarian law. Policy Brief

Erica Gaston (2021) Regulating irregular actors: Can due diligence checks mitigate the risks of working with non-state and substate forces? Working Paper.

Tanya Bandula-Irwin, Max Gallien, Ashley Jackson, Vanessa van den Boogaard and Florian Weigand (2021) Beyond greed: Why armed groups tax. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism

Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson (2021) Taliban attitudes and policies towards education. Working Paper

Rahmatullah Amiri and Ashley Jackson (2021) Taliban narratives on Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. Working Paper

Florian Weigand and Max Gallien (2021) Channeling Contraband – How States Shape International Smuggling Routes, *Security Studies*, 30(1): 79–106

Florian Weigand and Max Gallien (2021) *The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling*, Routledge

Tanya Bandula-Irwin, Max Gallien, Ashley Jackson, Vanessa van den Boogaard & Florian Weigand (2022) Beyond Greed: Why Armed Groups Tax, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*

Florian Weigand (2022): Why did the Taliban Win (again) in Afghanistan? *LSE Public Policy Review*, 2(3): 5, pp. 1–10

Ibraheem Bahiss, Ashley Jackson, Leigh Mayhew and Florian Weigand (2022) Rethinking armed group control Towards a new conceptual framework, ODI Working Paper

## Key articles and analysis

Ashley Jackson and Florian Weigand (2020) New Pandemic, Same Old Problems, Centre for the Study of Armed Group, ODI website

Ashley Jackson and Antonio Sampaio (2021) Afghan Cities Become Key Battlegrounds, *War on the Rocks*

Ashley Jackson (2021) Five Myths About the Taliban, *Washington Post*

Ashley Jackson (2021) This Is What Taliban Control Looks Like in 2021, *NY Times*

Ashley Jackson and Rahmatullah Amiri (2021) Like It or Not, Governments Must Negotiate with the Taliban to Ensure Girls' Access to Education, *Telegraph*

Florian Weigand (2021) Three myths about armed groups and the smuggling economy, *ODI Insight*

Ashley Jackson (2022) How the Taliban's Tax System Helped it Win Control of Afghanistan, *The Conversation*

## Key events and outreach

"Taliban Justice & Legal Pluralism", Virtual Roundtable Discussion, 20th May 2020, Private Event

"Armed group responses to the Covid-19 crisis", 17th June 2020, Public event

"From Violence to Security? Afghanistan 2020", Guest Lecture, University of Sussex, 30th November 2020

"Rebel Governance and Legitimization in Afghanistan", Guest Lecture, University of Nijmegen, 3rd December 2020

"Governance and Legitimacy in Afghanistan", Guest Lecture, Dublin City University, 22nd September 2021

"The Taliban government and foreign fighters in Afghanistan: issues, challenges and prospects," 29th October 2021, Private event

"Die Taliban", Bundeswehr Seminar: Wie weiter in Afghanistan? Die Lehren aus dem Afghanistaneinsatz, Europäische Akademie Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 15th March 2022, Private Event

"Book Launch: The Routledge Handbook of Smuggling", IDS, University of Sussex, Brighton, 3rd May 2022

"A new theocracy born? Assessing Taliban governance in Afghanistan", Eurasia aflame - Geopolitical Implications of the Ukraine crisis and the fall of Kabul for the region at large, Kreisky Forum, Vienna, 9th-10th June 2022, Private Event

"Civilian-armed group relations", ODI Roundtable, 21st June 2022, Private Event

"Clashes and Contraband - What do we know about smuggling and conflict?" Public Event, LSE, 12th June 2022

Centre researchers appeared on CNN, BBC, ITV, France 24, and other national and international media channels.

## Media

Centre for the Study on Armed Groups' research and insights garnered significant media attention. Its analysis was quoted by the Economist, The New York Times, the Financial Times, the Guardian, Wall Street Journal, Al Jazeera, Washington Post, NPR, Le Monde, The New Yorker, NBC News, Reuters, the Associated Press, BBC, the Times of London, the Telegraph, and a range of other national and international outlets.

# Transitioning into the Centre on Armed Groups

In 2022, we transitioned into an independent organization established in Geneva, Switzerland, with a more concise name: The Centre on Armed Groups. We also expanded our focus beyond research to include more policy engagement, advisory services and support to dialogue to ensure our research has an impact in real-time on the ground.

The Centre has built a wide network of experts and practitioners who cover more than 50 armed groups across over 30 countries and a range of thematic areas. It is overseen by a Committee and guided by an Advisory Network composed of internationally-recognized figures in humanitarian action and law, human rights and peacebuilding.

In 2022, the Centre also created its [website](#) and launched its first multi-year strategy (2023–2025). The Centre's commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and partnership-building is a central aspect of the strategy. We aim to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to engaging armed groups by working closely with scholars, practitioners, policymakers, and affected communities.

An illustration of this approach is the collaboration agreement signed with the Geneva Graduate Institute's Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding (CCDP) in November 2022. The collaboration built on a significant research project, funded by UK Innovation and Research, on armed group practice and interpretation of international humanitarian norms, [Words to Deeds](#), which involved both the CCDP and the Centre Co-Directors.

# Contact

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