



Tagungsbericht

“(Non-)Recognition of Armed
Non-State Actors: Risks and
Opportunities for Conflict
Transformation”

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International Conference: “(Non-)Recognition of Armed Non-State Actors: Risks and Opportunities for Conflict Transformation”

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I. Guiding questions and conferences results a. Research desiderata, questions, and state of the art

Many contemporary violent conflicts involve non-state actors as conflict parties. Armed non-state actors (ANSAs) are organized actors “who are (i) willing to use and capable of using violence to pursue their political objectives; (ii) not integrated into formalised state structures, such as regular armies, presidential guards, police or special forces; and therefore (iii) possess some degree of autonomy regarding their organisational structure, agendas, armed operations, resources, infrastructures and social relationships” (Schlichte/Schneckener 2015, 410). Governments are often hesitant to enter into informal talks and negotiations with ANSAs but in many violent conflicts, such (often secret) “talks” are initiated at some point. Some of the groups involved may have gained such a high relevance during a protracted armed conflict that governments face increasing pressure to negotiate with them; some ANSAs may have suffered military losses and seek such talks out of their weakness; and sometimes third parties intervene and exert pressure on both state and non-state conflict parties to start negotiations. Talking and negotiating usually imply gradual steps of recognizing and legitimizing the counterpart. Engaging with ANSAs is thus considered risky. In successful cases, armed non-state actors can be transformed into non-violent political parties and their legitimate goals might become incorporated into state policy. In unsuccessful cases, armed non-state actors might escalate their violent struggle, often resulting in governments being perceived as weak.

The complex role of (non-)recognition when dealing with armed non-state actors merits far greater attention than it has received so far from researchers in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies. “Recognition” is one of the most prominent concepts in Political Theory (PT), Social Philosophy and International Law and has only more recently gained some attention in International Relations (IR). Experiencing *recognition* in private and public life is a vital human need (Taylor 1994, 26). *Misrecognition*, which individuals or collective actors experience as humiliation, disrespect or false representations of their identity, is seen as a major cause of political resistance and significant in the escalation of potentially violent conflicts. IR and PT scholars have thus argued that recognition can have beneficial consequences on conflict dynamics in inter-state conflicts and in domestic conflicts in liberal societies, in which minority groups struggle for the recognition of their rights and identities (Daase et al. 2015; Fraser/Honneth 2003; Geis 2017; Lindemann/Ringmar 2012; O’Neill/Smith 2012; Wolf 2011). However, only very few researchers have dealt with the issue of (non-)recognition of ANSAs so far and sought to analyze which impact – positive or negative – practices of recognition have on conflict dynamics in the short and long term (Clément 2014; Aggestam 2015; Biene/Daase 2015; Herr 2015). The overarching goal of the conference was thus to address this research gap in the scholarship on conflict transformation and to advance thereby both recognition research and Peace and Conflict Studies.

More concretely, the participants were asked to address the following main questions in their papers:

- Which forms of (non-)recognition of non-state actors do occur in violent conflicts, and how can we analyze these?
- Which risks and opportunities do arise in processes of conflict transformation when state actors recognize armed non-state actors or, conversely, deny them recognition?

b. Summary of the individual contributions and the keynote speech

In her introduction, **Anna Geis** traced the main developments in academic research on recognition in Political Theory/Philosophy and International Relations. Charles Taylor conceptualises “recognition” as a basic human need for the formation of identities, both on an individual and collective level. Social groups thus often engage in political “struggles for recognition” (Axel Honneth), e.g. as minorities who seek to become recognised, gain certain rights or esteem by society. The discipline of International Relations (IR) initially adopted a legal understanding of recognition, as posited by international law. In recent years, however, more attention is dedicated to political and social concepts of recognition. Theories of recognition are usually applied to inter-state conflict dynamics, arguing e.g. that states strive for status, prestige and respect. Armed non-state actors have so far been understudied in this field. Of course, there is a great diversity among the motives, resources, strategies and organisational structures of these actors. Many of them are labelled “terrorist” organisations by their respective national government, by several states, or on a regional or even global level. Still, as the case studies in the workshop demonstrated, most – if not all – of them *do* seek recognition by others, be they states, (transnational) social groups or individuals. Important questions are thus: By whom do ANSAs seek recognition – and as what? Do they receive this sort of recognition – or another kind that they did not even want in the first place (mis-recognition)? Or are they denied any kind of recognition (non-recognition)?

Even though recognition is usually considered something positive or even vital, it is not *a priori* clear whether the recognition of a certain ANSA will entail positive effects for conflict transformation. Moreover, the recognition of groups that feel underrepresented or neglected is not the only relevant dimension for conflict transformation. There are also material aspects related to socio-economic marginalisation and grievances. Thus, questions of redistribution (Nancy Fraser) as an important dimension of conflict transformation should not be neglected in studying (successful) claims for recognition.

Often, as **Michael Nwankpa**'s analysis of Nigerian conflict dynamics and several ANSAs revealed, recognition and socio-economic justice are interconnected. He compared three ANSAs to which both the Nigerian government and the international community showed very different reactions: Boko Haram is considered a terrorist organisation by many states and International Organisations (IOs), including the Nigerian government. The secessionist movement “Indigenous people of Biafra” (IPOB) also falls under the government's definition of terrorism and the related legislation but does not get a similar amount of attention. By contrast, militant groups in the oil-rich Niger delta are not listed as terrorist groups, even though they strive for economic autonomy and even self-determination through violent means. The Nigerian government's strategies vis-à-vis these groups are strikingly divergent.

The practice of labelling and in particular the label “terrorist” was a topic that came up in most of the discussions. Indeed, there is not a single case of the very diverse actors discussed in the workshop, which has escaped this label in its history. In her keynote speech, **Véronique Dudouet** shed some light on the historical development of both the ANSAs themselves and how the international community called them. Before 2001, many ANSAs were considered rebel groups. They pursued a proactive politics of recognition, adapting to norms of conduct and discourse by those they sought recognition from, i.e. the US, Western governments and institutions of the international community. After “9/11”, however, the label of “terrorism” proliferated and increasingly impeded the possibility of certain actors' claims to be considered as legitimate. This development took a new turn with the emerging label of “violent extremist groups” which were considered as even more radical, religiously infused and brutal than the “old” terrorists – who were now considered as more rational and, in some cases, worthy of negotiation efforts. These replacing dynamics and hierarchies of labels show the extent to which the standards of who is recognisable on which grounds change over time.

In a similar vein, **Klaus Schlichte** and **Stephan Hensell** argued that there are normative regimes of recognition which change over time and are connected to what they call “world time” or “world historical context”. They identify three such contexts: the era of decolonisation, the Cold War, and the age of multilateral intervention, with the post-9/11 phase potentially constituting a fourth era of counter-terrorism. Each of the world times yielded specific conditions for the recognition of ANSAs. Whereas movements fighting for self-determination hardly met any obstacles to their recognition in the period of decolonisation, with many of them transitioning inconspicuously from ANSA to regular government, recognition practices bifurcated in the era of the Cold War. Whether or not an ANSA was recognised, depended on whether it was able to frame its goals and identity within the logic of the block confrontation and thus mobilise transnational support for its cause. Finally, the era of multilateralism is marked by the rejection of any form of political violence – except for the one exercised by the interveners. Thus, violent non-state actors seeking recognition are hardly successful unless they renounce violence first.

One of the most recent cases in which both recognition and a simultaneous disarmament and demobilisation process occur is the Colombian FARC (“Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia”). However, this process may indeed have ambivalent consequences, as **Jan Boesten** argued, presenting his and **Annette Idler**’s paper. The FARC had enjoyed a significant degree of acceptance in many rural areas of Colombia where they had the *de facto* monopoly of violence. The local population had recognised it as a political authority, which sets the rules and thus generates a certain degree of certainty. With the withdrawal of FARC from these areas and the simultaneous failure of the Colombian state to fill this gap, the fear of new violence among the remaining armed conflict parties arises. Moreover, a lack of previously available rules creates a climate of uncertainty and distrust among citizens. This may reinforce the conflict dynamics rather than easing them. Thus, recognition alone – and in particular the recognition of *one* actor in a multi-party conflict by one actor, i.e. the state – is not sufficient for successful conflict transformation.

Carolin Görzig showed in her paper that recognition is needed to be given by different actors in order for an ANSA – and thus a conflict – to transform. In her case study of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), she looked at the transnationally inspired learning process through which the leadership came to embrace a new role image of the PIRA, i.e. as a driver of peaceful transformation. She argued that it was essential for the leadership’s self-narrative to be accepted by its followers, i.e. that it found internal recognition. Conversely, in the case of the *al-jamaa al-islamiyah*, its transformation process towards a non-violent movement was initiated by impulses from its followers. Having started to build this new identity, the leadership needed to seek recognition from other Islamist groups. From her paper, it becomes clear that different recognition-givers need to be considered when analysing the transformation of ANSAs and conflict constellations.

Similarly, **Tom Kaden** and **Christoph Günther** claimed in their analysis of the ISIS organisation that its communication addressed several audiences in order to be recognised – or, in some cases, to avoid recognition – for very different roles. For instance, by actively delegitimising and thereby explicitly not recognising any state as a political form of organisation, ISIS also claims that it does not want to be recognised as a state by other states. Thus, it seems that ISIS does not seek recognition from those it does not recognise. At the same time, however, it does want to be recognised by the global *ummah* as a religious authority. What the *ummah* is, though, needs to be re-defined according to a logic of enemies and friends. Moreover, the recognition-seeking patterns changed significantly over time, depending strongly on the developments of the armed conflict on the ground. Whereas ISIS wanted to be recognised as a political entity with differentiated institutions at the inception of the *khilafah*, it later sought recognition as a military organisation composed of righteous and pious soldiers.

The temporal dynamics and changing patterns of recognition and non-recognition also play an important role for the Turkish PKK (“Kurdistan Workers’ Party”) and its long-lasting attempts at gaining recognition from the European Union (EU). Interestingly, the PKK had tried early on to use Turkey’s accession process and work around the domestic impasse by addressing the EU directly. As **Mitja Sienknecht** demonstrated, the PKK witnessed phases of success, e.g. in the 1990s, as well as failure when its military wing was no longer recognised in the course of the proliferation of the anti-terror norm. This, again, showed the extent to which the question whether an actor is recognised as an interlocutor or not is dependent on international norms and regimes of recognition.

This theoretical point was further elaborated on by **Jamie Pring** who analysed the interaction of norms of mediation and processes of recognition and inclusion in the case of the South Sudanese peace process. She convincingly argued that the mediation norm of inclusivity may stand in contrast to the recognition claims made by a group. Inclusion into a peace process may be perceived as a form of misrecognition if, for instance, another actor is included according to the same standards and thus grouped together with an actor who perceives him- or herself as radically different. Inclusion is thus essentially different from recognition because it may precisely mis-conceptualise an actor’s identity.

The concept of misrecognition was also central to **Chien-peng Chung**’s paper on the recognition of the Uyghurs by the Chinese central government. Interestingly, the Chinese state did make the Uyghurs some offers that would seem to constitute a form of recognition, e.g. designating Yinjiang as an autonomous province and establishing quotas for the Uyghur minority in government jobs. However, they were denied actual political participation. Moreover, symbols of their Muslim identity as well as certain names were forbidden. The narrative of the Chinese state is that a terrorist minority exploits the economic underdevelopment of the region. However, it seems that that the problem is much rather one of identity misrecognition.

Similarly, in the paper she co-authored with Stephen Harley, **Harmonie Toros** investigated the consequences of a specific form of misrecognition, i.e. the claim that a political organisation is exogenous to a conflict. In the case of Somalia, these claims of exogeneity are employed both by al-Shabaab *and* the Somali state as well as parts of the international community. Al-Shabaab delegitimises the current government by claiming it is controlled from outside; conversely, international (security) actors and the Somali government portray al-Shabaab as part of a transnational terror network foreign to Somali society. The mutual allegations that either the government or al-Shabaab are not “one of us” deny the respective actor to have a legitimate role in the conflict and its solution. Thus, the question of whether an ANSA is recognised as endogenous or not has direct consequences for conflict transformation.

Finally, the role of individual leaders in recognition and conflict transformation processes was explored. In her paper on the Tamil Tigers, **Solène Soosaithasan** focused on the role of LTTE (“Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam”) leader Prabhakaran’s and Indian leader Gandhi’s pride in impeding recognition processes in the Sri Lankan conflict. She argued that the Tamil Tigers, who had been considered a liberation movement by the Indian government for a long time, embraced an intransigent position after being labelled a terrorist organisation. Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi took great risks in handling the Sri Lankan crisis and insisted on defending India’s honour by intervening aggressively into the conflict. The Tamil Tigers, however, refused to recognise India’s status as a regional leading power. Thus, the hubris of both political leaders prevented the beginning of a (mutual) recognition process.

c. Overall results of the conference

Christopher Daase's input in the concluding session of the workshop tried to identify the most important themes, questions, and problems that were addressed throughout the workshop. It was complemented by **Anna Geis', Maéva Clément's and Hanna Pfeifer's** wrap-up comments.

For Christopher Daase, three central *hypotheses* emerged from the case studies: Recognition is causal for conflict transformation. Non-recognition is an impediment of conflict transformation and misrecognition might even be a cause of conflict escalation. In particular, the labelling of an actor as a "terrorist group" – as one of the most drastic forms of misrecognition – and the consequent delegitimisation of the actor and its claims, minimises the prospects of conflict transformation. Indeed, the proliferation of the term "terrorism" was striking throughout the workshop, with virtually every paper referring to at least one phase in which an ANSA was labelled a terrorist group. Thus, it seems that the "global war on terror" is among if not the most important normative frameworks within which recognition practices operate nowadays.

In terms of *concepts*, the closest conceptual neighbour to recognition was legitimacy. However, where legitimacy designates a normative quality of an actor, institution or act, recognition designates a practice by which an actor's (normative or identity) claim is accepted (to a certain degree). These practices depend not only on the local political culture and the nature of the political conflict, but also on the internationally accepted norms of recognition (or 'recognition regimes') at the time of the conflict. A recognition act may be a speech act (and, more generally, a symbolic act) or a material act, made by a political/public institution. The workshop also confirmed that the *identification of different forms and grades of recognition* is empirically salient and analytically important (Daase et al. 2015). Moreover, the case studies showed that recognition is not a single act, but rather a non-linear – potentially even contradictory – process within which different recognition-givers may or may not or only partially respond to recognition demands by ANSAs, thereby initiating a dynamic of redefining and renegotiating the identity of those who seek *and* those who grant recognition. If new practices of (non-/mis-)recognition arise in these processes, this may also imply changes in the normative framework within which recognition takes place (*long-term effects*).

II. Output, outreach and publications

a. Open questions and ways forward for future research

One of the most important open questions concerned the actual *effects* of recognition – both on an ANSA's identity and a conflict's dynamic – and the *methodology* most suitable to observe them. The micro-level analysis of ANSAs' opportunity structures, strategies and behaviour was not systematic enough to allow comparison across cases of when and why and with which effect ANSAs seek recognition. Also, the precise impact of an ANSA's (non-/mis-)recognition on the dynamic of a conflict (escalation/de-escalation) is particularly difficult to assess, with many other factors playing into the transformation or escalation of a conflict. As a consequence, the authors were asked to put a heavier emphasis on their methodological reflection and to focus on the concrete outcome of (non-/mis-)recognition processes for the respective conflict in view of the envisaged edited volume. We believe that future projects should be dedicated explicitly to methodological questions in the field of the recognition of ANSAs. This is not least due to the very specific obstacles that arise from studying armed groups, especially in a qualitative way. Finally, while normative considerations were discussed during the workshop (e.g. the ambivalence of recognition, legitimate vs. illegitimate claims, etc.), they were underrepresented and certainly deserve more attention in future projects.

b. Output and publications

The three organisers of the workshop will edit a volume based on the results of the workshop, which is envisaged to be published in early 2020 with a British university press. Moreover, a report outline for the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt (PRIF) has been sketched and will be co-published with Christopher Daase mid-2019. This report engages with the key concepts in the field of recognition, applying them to the context of conflicts with ANSAs, with the purpose of offering a heuristic view for practitioners dealing with ANSAs as part of conflict transformation efforts. Together with Véronique Dudouet (Berghof Foundation), a paper addressing practitioners and academics alike will be submitted to an outlet relevant for both communities. It will problematize state's labelling practices in the context of jihadi-Salafi groups and ask whether recognition as a practice may be relevant for dealing with this specific subset of ANSAs.

Finally, depending on the progress with the edited volume, we will organise panels at international academic conferences to promote the volume and increase its outreach.

III. Abstract

Social science research on “recognition” and “mis/non-recognition” has not yet entered the field of study addressing conflict transformation, especially with regards to conflicts with armed non-state actors (ANSAs). This international conference was dedicated to addressing this gap and thereby advancing by both recognition research and Peace and Conflict Studies. The driving research questions throughout the conference were: Which forms of (non-)recognition of ANSAs do occur in violent conflicts and how can we analyze them? Which risks and opportunities arise in processes of conflict transformation, when state actors recognise or, conversely, deny ANSAs recognition?

The conference was structured around individual case studies of particular relevance to the topic. The line-up of speakers covered prominent conflicts in which ANSAs participate, from various world regions and different socio-political contexts. Additionally, Véronique Dudouet (Berghof Foundation) reflected in her keynote speech on the relevance of recognition as a concept and potential tool for practitioners involved in conflict transformation.

In terms of results, three central hypotheses emerged from the conference: (i) Recognition is causal for conflict transformation, (ii) Non-recognition is an impediment to conflict transformation, and (iii) misrecognition might even be a cause of conflict escalation. In particular, the labelling of an actor as a terrorist group – as a drastic form of misrecognition – and consequent delegitimisation of both its claims and its actorness, minimises the prospects for conflict transformation. In this regard, the “global war on terror” stood out as among the most important normative frameworks within which (failing) recognition practices operate contemporarily.

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