Internal Control
Codes of Conduct within Insurgent Armed Groups
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Whatever their objectives, armed groups in various contexts tend
to rely on similar mechanisms
to control their fighters. These include a
recruitment process that aims to provide the
group with the appropriate human resources
in quantity and quality; a socialization
process for new recruits (such as through
oaths and initiation rituals); and the
elaboration of internal regulations—such as
codes of conduct—and their dissemination
among the rank and file.

The past few years have witnessed a surge
of interest in codes of conduct, but confusion
persists regarding their role and significance.
The term ‘code of conduct’ is a loose concept
that lacks a universal definition. Across
armed groups, codes of conduct share few
commonalities. Some are oral, some are
written; some are short and some are very
long; some are entitled ‘code of conduct’
while others have entirely different names,
such as ‘creed’ or ‘rules and points for
attention’. What they do have in common is
that they constitute part of the internal
regulations of armed groups, defining the
type of behaviour that the leadership expects
from all of its members.

This Occasional Paper sets out to define
more methodically what constitutes a code of
conduct, and how it compares to other types
of internal regulations known to have been
used by armed groups. Using case study
analysis, it then reflects on the conditions
under which codes of conduct are effective in
controlling the behaviour of fighters. Finally,
the report examines whether codes of
conduct are a potential tool for enhancing
respect for humanitarian norms, with a
particular focus on weapons control.

The report’s main conclusions include the
following:

■ It is important not to group all internal
regulations together under the label ‘codes
of conduct’. Different regulations have
discrete uses and provide distinct pieces of
information on an armed group.

■ Based on available documentation, armed
groups have issued no fewer than seven
distinct types of internal regulations of
varying lengths and purposes. These
include oaths, codes of conduct, standing
orders, operation orders, military manuals,
internal organization documents, and penal
codes.

■ Many factors help explain the effective-
ness of codes of conduct. To be effective,
their content must be clear, short, relevant,
and written in a language that is under-
standable by fighters. Regulations have
more impact when they are generated from
within the group, are widely disseminated
to fighters, and benefit from the strong backing
of the group’s leadership.

■ The content of a code of conduct is by
definition general and rarely addresses
weapons control issues explicitly. Armed
groups appear to rely on standing and opera-
tion orders to regulate the management and
use of arms by their fighters.

The findings of the report are significant on
three levels:

■ International criminal courts: Internal
regulations are part of the evidence
international criminal courts may use to
determine whether an armed group is party
to a non-international conflict—a legal
qualification that has important implica-
tions with respect to the obligations and
rights of armed groups as defined in
international law.

■ The humanitarian sector: Humanitarian
actors have identified codes of conduct as
central measures that armed groups can take
to improve their compliance with interna-
tional humanitarian law and human rights
law. But this approach has often concen-
trated on tools expressing a general
commitment to international law, and much
less on policy measures intended to translate
this commitment into action.

■ The research community: Codes of
conduct are a primary source of information
for researchers who focus on the internal
mechanisms, regulations, and values of
armed groups. While armed groups tend to
be secretive about most of their regulatory
documents, they are sometimes willing to
share codes of conduct with the outside
world.

This report is intended as a reference
document to assist all three groups in
deepening their understanding of codes of
conduct, and of the utility of these
regulations in furthering their respective
mandates.