

THE RISE AND THE FUTURE OF MILITIAS IN THE MENA REGION

edited by **Ranj Alaaldin, Federica Saini Fasanotti,
Arturo Varvelli, Tarik M. Yousef**
preface by **John R. Allen, Giampiero Massolo**



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Edited by Ranj Alaaldin, Federica Saini Fasanotti, Arturo Varvelli,
Tarik M. Yousef
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Preface

Over the last few years, non-state actors, subnational armed groups and militias have played an increasingly decisive role in defining the political and security landscape in several countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Traditionally, the employment of non-state armed actors has represented a common tool utilised by many Arab states – and particularly by authoritarian regimes – as part of an intentional strategy to counterbalance regular defense forces in the domestic competition of power. Differently from the past, contemporary militias and armed groups are the direct results of a severe, and sometimes drastic, reconfiguration of the power relations in fractured, weak or conflict-affected countries like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. The status they have acquired in the eyes of local and external actors, combined with the ability to dominate and provide essential services in un-regulated areas where state institutions have either collapsed or proved ineffective, represent exceptional policy challenges. This holds particularly true for regional and international players engaged in ongoing efforts to stabilise post-conflict countries and develop accountable institutions. In several occasions, co-governance arrangements between state and non-state authority resulted in the hybridisation of security governance in conflict-affected countries.

Due to their access to substantial arms, resources, funds, and assets, subnational armed groups must be considered as increasingly relevant and resilient forces. These groups acquire further

relevance when considering the legitimacy that, in some cases, they enjoy on the local and, foremost, the international level. Increasingly, indeed, militias are becoming essential interlocutors to foreign counterparts, in light of their role as a *de facto* substitute for many essential tasks that states facing crises and fracturing cannot otherwise obtain. Despite their different political orientations and backgrounds, many examples might be explanatory of this trend. In Iraq, state-sponsored armed groups have played a decisive role in curbing and defeating the ISIL onslaught in the country alongside weakened national forces. In Lebanon, Hezbollah has steadily consolidated its stance, not only proving its resilience but also showing vast degrees of operational autonomy. Since the beginning of the civil war, in Libya, both the governments in Tripoli and Tobruk have deputised regional militias for stabilizing and policing duties, a role for so long absent from the country's security landscape.

Faced with this complexity, the number of options for governments to confront this issue appears to be limited. On the one hand, suppressing them through coercive measures or politically marginalizing them can bring more costs than benefits to already fragile state institutions and exhausted conflict-ridden populations. At the same time, conventional Western models of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and Security Sector Reform (SSR) appear hardly relevant or enforceable in countries where competition in fractured societies and the absence of strong institutions preclude their implementation. In light of this, both Arab states and the international community are called upon engaging in a dialogue with militias and non-state armed groups.

The complexity and dynamism of the new security system in fractured and conflict-affected states make any theoretical adjustment heavily reliant on the local, regional, and international contexts. While there are standard features that characterise armed groups and their interactions with states and societies, there are also differences that warrant closer attention, under

the goal of formulating analytically rigorous and actionable policy recommendations. Due to militias' exceptional nature, it is therefore compulsory to develop dedicated and tailored approaches, to implement practical solutions that strengthen the rule of law without neglecting the demands and expectations of subnational groups.

This volume, published by ISPI and Brookings Doha Center, addresses the void in the current debate on subnational armed groups, by challenging the conventional understanding of armed non-state actors, focusing on the multiple ongoing conflicts and turmoil in the MENA region. The authors place a particular emphasis on whether armed groups can be integrated into state-building initiatives and whether these actors can play a constructive role with other service providers. Meanwhile, the volume will offer a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics which are commonly neglected, such as militias' systems of territorial control, their use of natural resources as well as their sources of funding. In an attempt to develop a debate on this topic crucial to regional security, this analysis is aimed at forging a discussion on potential scenarios for conflict mitigation, as well as developing mechanisms that can establish rules and limits for warfare and access to communities that need urgent humanitarian support.

John R. Allen
President Brookings Institution

Giampiero Massolo
President ISPI

1. The Past, Present & Future of Militias

Ranj Alaaldin

The Middle East and North Africa region is no stranger to conflict and political instability, but in recent decades it has become increasingly engulfed in a form of crisis of authority that has been capitalised on by armed non-state actors. Armed groups survive, proliferate and evolve not necessarily because of their weapons, financial resources and external patrons but because their emergence and entrenchment are rooted in fractured, volatile, and fragile political and social conditions. While sovereignty has historically been underpinned by the question of recognition and by the principle that states do not violate one another's territory or interfere in matters of internal affairs (Westphalian sovereignty), these principles of international affairs have weakened since the end of the Cold War. The territorial state has come under pressure ever since civil wars emerged as a common feature of the post-World War II international system. Superpower politics during the Cold War spawned a militia phenomenon as willing proxies were afforded immense resources in the battle for global dominance.

The September 11 attacks and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq paved the way for an international order that applied a looser interpretation and application of the laws governing the use of force, one that sought to reconcile the international system with the modern-day challenges of transnational terrorism and ungoverned spaces. However, with that came a shake-up of international norms and state sovereignty. Western-led

interventions in Kosovo and Iraq paved the way for a weakening of the international system, in large part because these interventions undermined the principles of sovereignty and created an environment that allowed other world powers such as Russia to pursue their own interests under the guise of the same legal and normative arguments presented by the West. Russia's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine and, later, in Syria during the ongoing civil war are examples of this.

Contrary to their popular perception, armed groups go as far back as the state-building process that unfolded in Europe during the Middle Ages, when citizens were called upon to collectively defend the realm. American militias also played a crucial role in the formation of state institutions. Militias were the first to fight for independence at Lexington and Concord, were frequently called upon to supplement the Continental Army, and were used to suppress counter-revolutionary efforts. The legacy of these militias remains in the National Guard and Reserve components of the US military. Militias and armed groups may have gained international attention in recent years with the advent of the Arab uprisings and so-called Islamic State, but their prominence actually started after decolonisation and the emergence of an international system that was dominated by fragile or weak states. Furthermore, in recent years, dependency on conventional forces has decreased; world powers have opted instead to rely on a combination of hybrid warfare (the use of irregular local fighters, cyberwarfare and drones, and others) and indigenous local forces whose capacity and willingness to either fight on behalf of or in partnership with outside powers makes them useful alternatives to the more politically fraught dependence on conventional forces¹.

Local proxies can include both conventional forces such as military and police forces as well as more irregular units such as tribes,

¹ A. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias*, Palo Alto, CA, Stanford University Press, 2013.

militias and national liberation movements. In recent years, the US and its Western allies have increasingly worked with these actors, sometimes simultaneously. In Iraq, they have relied on the Iraqi armed forces and Iraqi police units, Arab Sunni tribes in northern Iraq, irregular Shiite fighters, and the Kurdish Peshmerga.

In Syria, the West has supported and relied both on Arab rebel groups and tribes who have fought the Bashar al-Assad regime and the Kurdish fighters of the People's Protection Units (known as the YPG). Other examples can be found as far back as the late XIX and early XX century, including the British recruitment of town guards in the Cape Colony during the Boer War, military campaigns in Malaya between 1948 and 1960, and French-established civil defence groups during the war against the Viet Minh in Indochina between 1946 and 1954.

The topic is gaining importance in light of the changing character of wars. Between 1990 and 2014, the overall number of conflicts around the world fell by 40 percent. However, while the total number of ongoing conflicts is down about 20 percent from a high of 51 percent in 1991, the number of wars has increased by a third over the last six years, from 31 percent to 41 percent². According to the Centre for Systemic Peace, the only form of violent conflict that has virtually disappeared is wars between states, down to zero at present from more than 40 active wars and interstate incidents back in the 1980s³. By contrast, civil wars and terrorist attacks are more common today than two decades ago. Civil wars tend to drag on for generations, erode or destroy the social fabric of societies, and make countries far more susceptible to conflict relapse. Studies show that the average civil war lasts about 10 years, and can be worsened by the involvement of external states, a fact that goes some way toward explaining the Syrian quagmire⁴.

² Center for Systemic Peace, *Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility: Global Report*, 2014.

³ "Wars Between States Are Down, but Civil Wars Are Up", *New York Times*, 6 September 2016.

⁴ R. Caplan and A. Hoeffler, "Why Peace Endures: an analysis of post-conflict

Civil wars provide a fertile landscape for proxy wars and bids for regional supremacy that further exacerbate the proliferation and reinforcement of militia groups. There are broader implications. Cataclysmic conflicts like the Syrian civil war result in transnational power-struggles and militia networks that make them intractable. The transnational characteristics of militia groups, whether they are secessionist armed groups like Syria's Kurds, transnational jihadi organisations like so-called Islamic State, or Shia militias seeking to alter the balance of power equilibrium in the region at the behest of Iran, make it extremely difficult to engage in any meaningful reconstruction effort. They also produce policies that are mired in contradictions and confusion. Throughout the Syrian conflict, the West has engaged in optimistic, at times unrealistic policy-making that has been disconnected from the realities on the ground. As Frances Brown notes, after 2014 (when engagement with Syria became increasingly focused on defeating ISIS) stabilization programmes foundered on confusion over whether local council initiatives were advancing a policy that prioritized the defeat of Assad (and the rebuilding of the state) or "a regime restructuring outcome, in which the Assad regime would devolve power to local councils"⁵.

As products of weakened or collapsed institutions, militias not only erode a state's capacity to govern and provide basic services but frustrate its efforts to forge inter-state ties that are fundamental to international security. There are broader implications for international security, which depends on the capacity of states to adhere to international laws and norms, as well as treaty obligations that are critical to fostering international consensus, particularly where these relate to the creation of supra-national legal orders. Indeed, during the XIX century and well into the XX century, it was commonly held that if a state

stabilization" Centre for the Study of African Economies, July 2016.

⁵ F. Z. Brown, *Dilemmas of Stabilization Assistance: The Case of Syria*, Carnegie Endowment, 26 October 2018.

lost its power to make war, it lost its sovereignty: the state's self-reliance was a fundamental mark of sovereignty.

That said, the global international security agenda has disproportionately focused on the fragility of the state and its rehabilitation in its attempts to address the question of so-called ungoverned spaces exploited by malignant militant groups. In large parts of the Middle East, militias are the result of longstanding, pre-war legacies of dysfunctional governance and authoritarianism. It is not necessarily conflict or its immediate aftermath that fuels the growth of these actors and reinforces their resiliency, but longstanding grievances and a sense of injustice among beleaguered populations. Traditional policy prescriptions centred on security reform strategies often become ill-fated investments, and local and external actors have a poor track record in attempting to forestall and mitigate the second-order effects of war.

The response requires a fundamental paradigm shift that discards the conventional policy toolkit. An alternative -and more realistic -proposal would focus on a comprehensive, holistic strategy harnessing the capacity of other mediums. That includes the moderating role civil society can play, its legitimacy often far outweighing that of political parties and elites or institutions steeped in corruption and mismanagement. Civil society is often better positioned to challenge the prominence of militias and can constitute a means through which to discourage the youth from joining armed groups. Armed groups thrive in an environment of grievances and political and violent instability. It is at the grassroots that the effort to constrain these groups must begin, and political compromise over factional, religious and ethnic differences must become the norm rather than the exception. For both local and external actors looking to foster change, this is the pre-requisite to any attempt to establish democratic norms, invest in state institutions. And achieve sustainable peace-building. At the very least, this can help accommodate the radically transformed nature

of governance and authority in the region, which are far more dynamic than ever before: the dynamics of interaction between the multiple lines of authority at the local level – ranging from civil society, to members of the political class and the religious establishment and armed groups – have to be afforded greater appreciation so as to establish more inclusive, legitimate national frameworks that can reinforce the relationship between citizen and state.

This is particularly critical in light of studies that establish how it is local actors such as civil society that are better equipped to hold armed groups accountable and to nudge them into embracing democratic norms⁶. The demographics of the region, including the youth bulge and growing population rates, makes it imperative to ensure civil-society is better positioned to provide alternatives to the status and economic benefits that come from joining militias. In this sense, the holistic strategy should ensure militias are not classed as either the problem or the solution. Its underlying objectives should instead focus on ensuring they are part of a process in which they can become constructive actors during political transitions.

Reducing the complexity of the challenge through a state and non-state dichotomy further paralyses effective policy reaction in the many contexts where the armed non-state actor has outgrown the state itself, effectively becoming a supra-national authority. Lebanon's Hezbollah has bridged the gap in the state's disintegration and failure in providing services, while also,

⁶ For studies on how civil society can nudge armed groups into accepting human rights, see Oliver Kaplan, *Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection*, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.cw> See Kaplan, *Nudging Armed Groups* For studies on how civil society can nudge armed groups into accepting human rights, see O. Kaplan, “Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection”, *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 2013. See Kaplan, “Nudging Armed Groups: How Civilians Transmit Norms of Protection”, *International Journal of Security and Development*, December 2013.

paradoxically, hindering the state's re-emergence. The organisation's evolution has inspired similar movements in Iraq, where transnational Shia militia groups have transitioned from rag-tag militia groups to formidable socio-political organisations with strong popular support rooted in the fact that their legitimacy and capacity to provide services far outmatches the capacity of the government, particularly in the southern Shia hinterlands. This complicated overlap between the state and militia organisations, some of which have become fully integrated components of the political process, alongside the growth of increasing numbers of sub-state actors, undermines the oft-made assertion that it is ultimately good governance and the building of institutions that can remedy instability and conflict, as those institutions will inevitably end up becoming dominated by the armed groups that have had the benefit of time and resources to entrench their positions within them. So-called conventional forces such as the military and police have in many instances become militias in different uniform.

As gatekeepers of critical institutions, militias inevitably become formalised and constitutionally mandated socio-economic actors. The draining of state resources equips militias with the capacity to control the distribution of economic resources, which in turn expands their patronage networks and undermines economic development that is critical to addressing the economic grievances that have underpinned recent political and social upheaval in the region. In transitioning countries like Libya and Iraq, long-established political elites have exacerbated the challenge by either co-opting militias or colluding with them to secure their own political interests and objectives, either by capitalising on their popular support or by deploying them for the purposes of intimidating rivals. In this sense, militias become a button and buffer: a button to intimidate or eliminate rivals and a buffer for the purposes of having plausible deniability.

The current approach to the militia phenomenon lacks targeted policy responses that require a “think big, act small” approach to congested, volatile and inter-connected spheres of conflict and instability in the region. The international community is itself still unable to establish the parameters of its engagements and interactions with armed non-state actors. For example, the debate on the return of jihadi fighters who joined ISIS and their right to a fair trial has seen instances where their fate has been left to their captors. Indeed, in January 2018, despite concerns over the criminal justice system in Syrian Kurdistan (currently under the control of the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG), the French government declared that jihadi fighters can be tried by the PYD, particularly since the fighters had access to lawyers and, in some cases, consular services. By default, this established de-facto recognition of the autonomous region, contradicting the West’s preference for recognising and engaging state authorities and, secondly, European and US relations with Turkey, which views the group as a terrorist organisation. The far-reaching consequences of such contradictory policies were witnessed when Turkey conducted its military incursion into north-east Syria in October 2019. In other words, the absence of a forward-thinking strategy with regards to armed non-state actors creates a cycle of confusion and contradictory policies that have serious implications on regional stability and national security.

As a starting point, the international community should seriously consider establishing laws and guidelines for engaging armed groups, particularly in contexts where these actors are pivotal to defeating terrorist groups that would otherwise exploit state fragility to launch attacks on civilian populations locally and internationally. Save for the profit-oriented criminal gangs and networks that simply position themselves as opportunistic actors looking to fill their coffers through violence and disorder, isolating others that either see themselves as, or actively aspire to become, socio-political movements and legitimate, electorally mandated members of the ruling class is unhelpful

and these actors will still, in any case, operate from the margins with deadly impact. The picture becomes somewhat more complicated when these armed groups are national liberation movements that seek their own state, as opposed to being integrated into an existing territorial state.

The Kurds, for example, have long sought statehood, but what has made them comparatively successful as an armed group is their attempts to acquire both international recognition and legitimacy. Pursuant to this goal, their discourse and interactions have generally been steeped in international norms and fundamental human rights; they speak the language of democracy and the rule of law so as to become integrated into the international system and, ultimately, acquire their own state. As the literature shows, the pursuit of international legitimacy plays a key role in shaping their conduct and identity, making it much easier for outside actors to both work with them and ensure they do not commit the human rights abuses and acts of violence that they may have otherwise committed. The challenge for policymakers is not necessarily whether armed groups aspire to become, or perceive themselves as state-builders that can complement the state and its provision of services to the local population but, rather, the vision they have for the future of the state and its identity. As has already been alluded to, armed groups may seek integration into the state so as to weaponise it, and there should be limited space for allowing armed groups that are unwilling to demobilise and disarm while seeking to make the transition into a socio-political movement that can essentially fleece the state of its wealth and power. The process should be re-defined so that it involves not asking militias to give up their guns and power, but rather incorporating them into a social dialogue and contract that aims to secure their stake in the decision-making processes. All too often, armed groups operate in a social and legal void, since their precise relationship with the state and society remains fluid and ill-defined. This breeds uncertainty and, therefore, unwillingness to engage in dialogue and consensus-based politics.

2. CASE STUDIES

Hezbollah: The Superior Militia

Mohanad Hage Ali

Since the 1980s, the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah has evolved in two different ways. It has first filled the void caused by the disintegration of the state and its failure to provide services, then, in a 180-degree turn, it has contributed to hindering its re-emergence. In spite of co-existence and attempts at reconciliation, the metamorphosis of the relationship between Hezbollah and the state resembles an antithetic relationship and an eternal vicious circle, one which continuously undermines the state¹. Under the Syrian regime's control (1990-2005), Hezbollah focused on improving its military capacity, religious institutions, and its welfare network, while the state remained dependent on the Syrian regime. The Syrian hegemony over Lebanon from the 1990s onwards defined Hezbollah's role as we now know it, as it morphed from one of several dozen armed militias into a military actor that assumed the state's defence functions in the post-conflict era, and to a large extent, exerted a monopoly over conflict. This transformation in Hezbollah's role took place gradually and merged into its current form. From 2005 onwards, Hezbollah served as a proxy for the Syrian regime, creating local alliances and increasing tensions southward, undermining attempts at rebuilding the state. Following the Syrian conflict, and its ramifications on Lebanon, Hezbollah developed a dual political and security strategy to deal with rising threats to its status as an independent militia

¹ NPR, "[Who Is Hezbollah?](#)", 2006.

within the state. This strategy entailed subcontracting internal security challenges to local actors and allies, threatening the use of force to achieve political ends². This strategy was accompanied by the occasional call for the dismissal of the entire sectarian balance if the organisation's arsenal was to be questioned.

Pre-2005: The Formative Phase

As the Lebanese conflict entered its final phase in the late 1980s, the country's warring factions shifted from engaging in a brutal cross-sectarian war to an intra-sectarian conflict. The Christian-led Lebanese army launched a brutal war against the Lebanese Forces, while Amal and Hezbollah, both Shiite militant groups, fought a brutal war which continued into the early 1990s. The latter conflict was largely seen as an Iranian-Syrian showdown over who controls the Lebanese Shiites³.

As the warring sides negotiated a Saudi-brokered deal, known as the Taif agreement, a Syrian-dominated order took shape. The Syrian army launched an attack against the Lebanese Army, led by General Michel Aoun, the incumbent president, who fled to the French Embassy, and then to Paris after his surrender⁴.

However, the Syrian domination was based on two tacit agreements: a political one with Saudi Arabia, which saw the Lebanese-Saudi businessman Rafik Hariri rise to the post of prime minister, and a stronger long-term security arrangement with Iran that allowed Hezbollah to grow its arsenal in order to fight against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon. Syria's arrangement with Iran would prove to be more lasting and fruitful, as it provided leverage with the West during the refugee crisis, and with the Israeli side in ongoing negotiations.

² D. Byman and B. Saab, *Hezbollah in a Time of Transition*, Center for Middle East Policy, 2014.

³ "The Lebanese Civil War and the Ta'if Agreement" in P. Salem (ed.), *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World. Selected Essays*, Beirut, AUB Publications, 1997.

⁴ LA Times Archives, *Lebanon's Aoun Gives In, Granted Asylum by France*, 1990.

In retrospect, the party proved vital in helping the regime tip the balance in Lebanon in its favour after the assassination of Hariri in 2005, and the rise of a broad anti-Assad coalition in the country⁵. In 2012, the organisation also helped the regime survive the Syrian revolution and the ensuing military challenges to its authority. Hezbollah dispatched thousands of fighters who engaged in decisive battles across the country, and lost more than a thousand men in defending the regime⁶.

All of this was not imaginable on September 30, 1989, when a group of Lebanese leaders signed the Taif Agreement to end the Lebanese conflict⁷. Back then, Hezbollah was still a marginal group in the Lebanese conflict, as the Syrian-backed Amal movement dominated the fighting and controlled more areas in Beirut and in the Shiite-majority heartlands in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley. While presenting a roadmap for secularisation, the agreement paved the way for a new division of power between the various militias, namely the Amal movement and the Druze-dominated Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) on one hand, and Hariri, on the other⁸. On the Christian side, pro-Syrian figures with little popularity in their respective communities assumed the presidency and ministerial positions. The Syrian regime had marginalized the major Christian factions, including those who agreed to the Taif Agreement (such as the Lebanese Forces and The Phalanges).

The power-sharing arrangement was not inclusive of Hezbollah, but the organisation's function was represented. The Taif included a statement on "taking all the steps necessary to liberate all Lebanese territories from the Israeli occupation, to

⁵ P. Salem, "The Future of Lebanon" *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006.

⁶ S. Atrache, *How Hezbollah is changing the war in syria - and vice versa*, International Crisis Group, 6 June 2014.

⁷ [The Taif Agreement](#). This agreement, which ended the civil war in Lebanon, was negotiated in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia, in September 1989 and approved by the Lebanese Parliament on November 4, 1989.

⁸ J.G. Karam, *Beyond Sectarianism: Understanding Lebanese Politics through a Cross Sectarian Lens*, Middle East Brief, no. 107, April 2017.

spread state sovereignty over all the territories, and to deploy the Lebanese army in the border area adjacent to Israel”⁹. This statement gave Hezbollah a clear mandate to liberate the South and deploy violence against the Israeli army in the occupied territories. The organisation defined its mission according to this mandate. Even its participation in parliament was to serve as “the resistance” against the occupation. This was evident in Hezbollah’s choice to call its parliamentary bloc “the bloc of loyalty to resistance”¹⁰.

The organisation was totally focused on its resistance project, building its military capacity, and improving mobilisation and recruitment tactics, while its welfare network also grew. By the 1990s, the web of Hezbollah’s institutions covered micro-banking, lower and higher education, health services including hospitals, construction, assistance to families of the injured and killed, scouts, and media¹¹. This plethora of networks serves the resistance, either through education, recruitment, or post-conflict care. With this growing network, and successful military operations until the Israeli withdrawal in 2000, Hezbollah gained popularity while operating outside the state apparatus. In fact, up until 2005, the organisation was considered an outsider to Lebanon’s failing governance and infamous corruption (Hezbollah’s Influence in Lebanon, 2018). On the other hand, the Amal movement claimed the Lebanese Shiites’ full share in the government. This “share” ranged from ministerial positions and public sector employment to often lucrative government contracts.

Politically, Hezbollah’s arsenal remained secure under the Syrian regime, dependent on Damascus for political cover and protection, and part of an imposed Lebanese consensus on the issue of Hezbollah’s weapons.

⁹ E. Chalala, “Syrian Policy in Lebanon, 1976-1984: Moderate goals and pragmatic means”, *Journal of Arab Affairs* vol. 4, no. 1, 1985, pp. 67-87

¹⁰ N. Dagher, “Hezbollah: Between Ideology and Political Pragmatism”, *Defence Magazine*, vol. , no. 63, 2008.

¹¹ J. Daher, “Hezbollah: A Historical Materialist Analysis” PhD Thesis SOAS, University of London, 2015.

The organisation's status guaranteed a certain influence in public life, although not manifested in the state. Its institutions continued to grow in Lebanese Shiite areas, as the organisation accumulated significant military strength and expertise. This was evident in its Quds Day parade, held on the last Friday of every Ramadan¹².

This situation ended in 2005. After the Syrian regime withdrew its forces following the assassination of the former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri on February 14, 2005, Hezbollah found itself obliged to join the country's evolving political process¹³. After winning the parliamentary elections as a part of a Quartet alliance, known in Arabic as the *al-Hilf al-Rubaii*, the party joined the Lebanese government for the first time in its history. In government, Hezbollah prioritised its weapons. Consensus over the organisation's arsenal was a more urgent and necessary priority than the protection of the Syrian regime. This is why Hezbollah formed the four-way alliance with the Amal movement, the Progressive Socialist Party, and the Future Movement (the last two parties being distinctly against the Syrian regime), gaining the new government's acceptance of its weapons arsenal in return for concessions such as the passing of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and a series of anti-Syrian regime measures. Ultimately, this meant once again undermining the state's monopoly over violence and outsourcing the country's defence to an Iran-backed, exclusively Shiite group¹⁴.

Hezbollah's survival in the 2006 war, and its role in reconstruction, undermined the state. The party distributed considerable cash payments to those affected in the conflict. This strengthened its role and image as a protector and service provider to the Lebanese Shiite community.

¹² NPR (2006).

¹³ A.R. Norton, "The Role of Hezbollah in Lebanese Domestic Politics", *The International Spectator*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2007, pp. 475-491.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The implications of this conflict became evident in the country's post-conflict politics. Less than two years later, on May 7, 2008, Hezbollah, led a number of allied militias and took over West Beirut, after the Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora removed the head of airport security, an ally of the organisation, and ordered an investigation against the party's private telephone network. The attack further undermined the state, showcasing the party's strength and the army's inability to intervene, let alone stop the fighting. This was Hezbollah's first decision to directly employ its arsenal and military capabilities to impose its political will on the Lebanese political system. The Lebanese government withdrew its contentious decision, while Hezbollah and its foes reached an agreement to form a government and end the Presidential deadlock by electing Michel Sleiman, then military chief¹⁵.

Hezbollah deployed its military might again to tip the balance of power in Lebanon, pushing the Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri out of power in 2011. Walid Jumblatt, the Lebanese Druze leader and a Hariri ally, helped Hezbollah oust the Prime Minister, following a parade of militia men wearing black shirts, a sign of belonging to the organisation's military or security wing. This incident became known as the "Black Shirts Incident", and is usually referenced when illustrating the influence of Hezbollah's military might on Lebanese politics¹⁶.

Nearly a year after the incident, Hezbollah entered the Syrian conflict, which brought about a number of security challenges. The organisation clashed with the Lebanese President Michel Sleiman, who rejected their involvement in Syria. This stance increased tensions and culminated in the firing of Katyusha rockets near the Presidential palace; this was seen as a warning message to the Lebanese President¹⁷.

¹⁵ T. Perry, "Lebanon Political Conflict turns violent" Reuters, 2008.

¹⁶ A. Franjie, *The Evolution of Hezbollah: Party formation and political legitimacy*, Semantic Scholar, 12 May 2013.

¹⁷ E. Picard and A. Ramsbotham, "Reconciliation, reform and resilience: Positive peace for Lebanon" HAL-SHS, 2012.

In an attempt to include non-Shiite members in its resistance campaign against Israeli occupation, Hezbollah founded the Lebanese Brigades of Resistance, (aka *al-Saraya*) in November 1997, less than three years before the Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The *al-Saraya* was in essence part and parcel of the resistance effort against occupation, with a relatively lower impact than that of Hezbollah.

The organisation was also involved in proxy intimidation, through a number of affiliated militias operating under the umbrella of the Lebanese National Resistance Brigades, known locally as “*alsaraya*” (The Brigades). Although initially established to allow non-Shiites to join the fight against Israeli occupation in November 1997¹⁸, after the Israeli withdrawal in 2000 these militias morphed into local actors, attracting thugs and former militiamen from the war era. Most significantly, they were deployed in Sidon, South Lebanon, to intimidate the anti-Syrian Sunni cleric Ahmad al-Asseer and his armed followers. The militia had targeted a Beirut-based TV station. The targeting of al-Asseer activism and intimidation in the South resulted in an escalation, leading to a clash with the Lebanese security forces which spelled the end of the network in August 2012. Hezbollah would not be directly involved in these incidents, at least not explicitly. Such discretion allowed the organisation to politically and publically manoeuvre a volatile situation. Through its funding and training capacity, Hezbollah subcontracted these conflicts to local actors, hailing from various parties, backgrounds, and sectarian affiliations. Hezbollah’s main designated role was resistance against Israel, not deploying its arsenal in local conflicts, and so it was necessary to subcontract these small, albeit significant confrontations.

¹⁸ C. Zambelis, “[Hizb Allah’s Lebanese Resistance Brigades](#)”, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, no. 11, 2014.

Resistance or the System

With the onset of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, calls for the gradual disarmament of Hezbollah renewed momentum. As a response, in June 2012 Hassan Nasrallah called for a National Conference titled "The National Defence Strategy: "Building a State". The aim of the conference was to promote the idea of a new political order in Lebanon, to be based on "national composition rather than sectarian or regional lines". Evidently, the main purpose behind the Conference was to tie in the country's National Defence Strategy with state apparatuses and political representation. Nasrallah's suggestion thus defended and justified the legitimacy of the organisation's arsenal on the basis of sectarian power. The organisation also linked this demand for a new political order with the "unfair" distribution of power between the Shiite and Sunni demographic in Lebanon and the necessary use of "resistance" weapons, which compensate for the lack of Shiite representation within the overall balance of power with the consociational government according to unofficial electoral tables and statistics. This use of weaponry has been justified by Hezbollah on the basis of the [Taif Agreement](#), which states that all steps necessary to "liberate all Lebanese territories from the Israeli occupation" are allowed to maintain its "capacity as a "resistance force"¹⁹.

Changing the Syria Conflict Alibi

The alibi of resistance was used to justify the intervention in Syria. Following a similar rationale as its conflict with Israel, Hezbollah made the case that the Lebanese state was again incapable of deterring the emerging "threat" from its eastern border, propelling Hezbollah to intervene. Initially, the party spoke only of protecting dual Lebanese-Syrian citizens on the Syrian side of the border, but it then started pointing to an imminent

¹⁹ [The Taif Agreement](#).

threat to the sacred Shiite shrines in Syria, namely those of Sayyeda Zeinab, the daughter of the third Shiite imam, Husayn Ben Ali. The organisation then expanded its rationale, claiming there was a larger threat with serious consequences. Nasrallah spoke on May 25, 2013 of a more existential threat in neighbouring Syria, requiring a wider engagement in the conflict:

[...] is the back of the resistance and its foundation, and the resistance cannot stand by watching, leaving its back exposed or its foundation broken, otherwise we would be idiots. The idiot is the one who watches the conspiracy crawling toward him, but doesn't move. If Syria falls into American and takfiri hands, the resistance will be surrounded and Israel will enter Lebanon to impose its conditions and again carry Lebanon into an Israeli era.

Nasrallah's rationale for the conflict shifted dramatically in 2013, and the intervention became the most contentious issue in Lebanese politics. However, as the Russian intervention shifted the course of the conflict in Syria in 2015-17, the Lebanese political scene shifted away from contesting Hezbollah's arsenal.

Fajr al-Jurood

The Lebanese militant organisation, following its successes in Syria, wanted to consolidate its military victory through clearing Lebanese border regions from Jihadist groups. However, this attack within Lebanese territory pressured the Lebanese military into intervention. On July 21, 2017, Hezbollah launched its first operation against Islamic State and Nusra Front militants on the border with Syria. The Syrian military, and not the Lebanese one, partnered with Hezbollah in this attack. Calling the shots on operations within Lebanese territory caused controversy, as Hezbollah's foes criticized the organisation's involvement.

In August, the Lebanese military launched its own campaign, claiming there was no coordination with the Syrian side and Hezbollah. The Lebanese army operation, named *fajr al-jurood*,

or dawn of the outskirts, laid bare the duality of the Lebanese security system. At the heart of Hezbollah's *raison d'être* is that the army is incapable of defending the country alone, and so a successful campaign to uproot a threat on Lebanese soil plays into the narratives of the organisation's foes. Since the Lebanese military is capable of doing its job, why should Hezbollah continue to maintain its military capability? Behind the facade of complementary roles, between "the resistance" (Hezbollah) and the army, a competition unfolded. Hezbollah organized a tour for international media, and then played an integral role in concluding an agreement with both militant groups, which entailed a transfer of militants through Syrian territories²⁰. With these deals in place, through Hezbollah's coordination with the Syrian regime, the organisation appeared to be in the lead, again undermining the highly praised Lebanese military role in the campaign.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, specifically after the end of the Lebanese civil war, the organisation's existence has been antithetic to the rebuilding of state's rebuilding, particularly with regards to its monopoly on violence. The party's *raison d'être* has always been based on the state's inability to defend its borders, but preserving this *status quo* became a goal in its own right. This disposition forced Hezbollah to use intimidation and the subcontracting of violence to subvert attempts to disarm the organisation or even to suggest such a thing in order to strengthen the state's role in a multiconfessional and fragmented society. *Al-Saraya*, Hezbollah's non-Shiite militia, played a role in intimidating a range of opponents, including nonconformist media.

Although the organisation consistently claims its role complements that of the armed state institutions through the "army-people-resistance" triangle, the organisation has consistently worked to dominate the political sphere, and it undermined

²⁰ S. Hussein, "[Along on a Hezbollah tour](#)", AFP, 25 April 2017.

the army when it assumed its role as the country's defender against external threats, such as in the August 2017 campaign on the Lebanese-Syrian border. The organisation's militia has morphed, with a core fighting group whose function is to resist occupation – or what's left of it – and a subcontracted array of groups and alliances whose mission is to manage local opposition to this *status quo*.

Janus in the Land of the Two Rivers: What Role for Militias in Iraq?

Andrea Plebani

Although security issues in Iraq have been intensively studied over the last few decades, their fluid and multiple facets make them an exceptionally complex case study. Notwithstanding the traditional centrality bestowed upon regular forces by the various political leaderships governing the land of the two rivers, the Iraqi security system has always been characterised by the presence of a wide array of armed groups, militias and paramilitary units. While leaders in Baghdad tried to quell the challenge represented by overtly hostile non-state security networks, in several cases they directly supported parallel forces for specific internal and external political aims. In doing so they largely resorted to top-down approaches aimed at guaranteeing at least a modicum of control over these actors, *de facto* contributing to a significant hybridisation of the country's security system. Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) impacted dramatically on the equilibriums of the country but, far from quelling the influence of local non-state actors, contributed to their (unintended) empowerment well beyond the mere security dimension. The chapter therefore aims to analyse the complexity of the Iraqi security system, focusing on the role played by irregular and parallel security forces. Due to the critical role played during the war against the self-declared Islamic State and to the influence it secured within the country, the analysis will concentrate

in particular on the Hashd al-Sha‘bi (Popular Mobilization Forces - PMF), trying to outline their multiple facets and to understand what role they could play within the Iraqi system.

Continuities and Discontinuities in the Iraqi Security Spectrum

Since the foundation of modern Iraq, the country’s security scenario has been defined by significant levels of internal fragmentation and competition, with multiple power centers able to directly or indirectly contest Baghdad’s authority well beyond the consolidation of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Yet, to consider the Iraqi state as merely a passive actor unable to check competing security networks does not capture the complexity of the dynamics shaping the Iraqi security system. Far from simply tolerating the existence of these irregular forces, different political leaderships actually favored the hybridisation of the country’s security structures for multiple purposes and interests. While hailing the Iraqi Security Forces as one of the pillars of the state, Saddam Hussein actively supported the emergence of parallel security networks to counterbalance the ISF and to limit the emergence of potential competitors¹. Or, again, when faced with the consequences of the disastrous campaign in Kuwait, the *ra’is* did not refrain from widening the Iraqi security spectrum, devolving important responsibilities to diverse social forces; tribal networks loyal to the regime first and foremost².

In this sense, Iraq’s history was influenced by a wide array of paramilitaries, militias, armed groups and competing security

¹ I. Al-Marashi and S. Salama, *Iraq’s Armed Forces. An Analytical History*, Oxon, Taylor & Francis, 2008.

² See A. Baram, “Neo-Tribalism in Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s Tribal Policies 1991-96”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1997; and “Saddam Husayn: Between his Power Base and the International Community”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2000.

networks well before 2003. Yet the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime marked a real watershed for the land of the two rivers, resulting in levels of security fragmentation and hybridisation never registered before. While before Operation Iraqi Freedom, Baghdad tended to adopt a top-down approach towards security hybridisation, post-2003 Iraq registered a sort of complete inversion of these positions, with militias obtaining significant control over crucial sectors of the state and the ability to influence it from within. The crumbling of state institutions, coupled with the inability of the International Coalition to provide even basic services to the population, favored the emergence of a multitude of new and old non-state actors competing to fill the security vacuum left by the fall of Ba'athist Iraq. While their *raison d'être* relied mainly on protection of the communities they identified with, security soon came to represent only one (albeit a crucial one) of the dimensions they were active in. In a matter of few years both new and pre-2003 groups secured growing influence in the socio-political arena, with several movements succeeding in imposing their authority over significant parts of the country in overt competition with the state. All this also had a dramatic impact on the financial resources at their disposal, transforming them from mere security providers into economic enterprises profiting from the control of licit and illicit trafficking as well as from the administration of checkpoints and border crossings. Even more importantly, despite significant internal opposition, some of these major security networks gained critical political weight. Drawing on levels of popular support that have too often been underestimated, on solid relations with key local political forces and even with diverse regional and international actors, they succeeded in expanding their influence within the new Iraqi state, giving birth to hybridisation processes partially reversing the old top-down approaches typical of the pre-2003 era. And this well beyond the "boundaries" of the Arab Shia community, with which militias tend to be generally associated nowadays. While the influence that Shia-associated militias exerted within state apparatuses cannot be denied (as aptly demonstrated by the

role the Badr brigades played within the Ministry of the Interior even after their official disbandment, or by the virtual impunity “special groups”³ could count on), non-Shia-aligned informal security networks played pivotal roles, too. From 2006 onwards, largely Arab Sunni tribal groups that represented the bulk of the *sahwa* councils contributed dramatically to US-led efforts to drive Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) forces out of most of central Iraq⁴. This, coupled with the benefits stemming from the solid partnership they established with US military forces on the ground, allowed them to increase the political stature of their leaders and to create the conditions for bringing important parts of the Arab Sunni community back to the political arena, as aptly demonstrated by the positions they secured, especially after the 2009 provincial elections.

The reduction in the peaks of violence reached during the civil war, the growing discredit that affected some of the most prominent armed groups and the apparent consolidation of state institutions registered between 2008⁵ and 2010 seemed destined to severely curb the influence these informal security networks could exert over the land of the two rivers. At the same time, then-Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki - despite significant internal opposition and protests – seemed ready to replicate old top-down approaches towards informal security networks, mobilizing a growing number of irregular forces under the banner of the *isnad* councils.

³ The term was used to indicate three main groups once part of the Mahdi Army (the Promised Day Brigade, Kata’ib Hezbollah and ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq) responsible for multiple attacks against US forces in Iraq and allegedly backed by Teheran

⁴ M. Benraad, “Iraq’s Tribal ‘Sahwa’: Its Rise and Fall”, *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011; J. McCary, “The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives”, *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2009.

⁵ Particularly significant, in this regard, were the ISF operations launched against militias strongholds in Basra and in Baghdad. While based on solid political calculus, they demonstrated the government’s will and capabilities to contrast the excessive influence some informal security networks exerted on important part of the Iraqi system.

Yet the destabilisation that gradually returned to growing swaths of central-western Iraq and the ascendance of the self-declared “Islamic State” (IS) soon proved how such a balance was difficult to reverse. The humiliating defeat suffered by Iraqi security forces in Mosul in June 2014 reaffirmed the role that irregular security networks played in post-2003 Iraq. Despite its superiority in manpower and weaponry, the ISF wasn’t able to quell the offensive launched by a few thousand jihadists that, in just a few days, secured control over the second most populous Iraqi city. The wide array of 40+ new and old armed groups cobbled together under the aegis of the Popular Mobilization Forces mobilised over 100,000 fighters who proved fundamental to fending off the offensive launched by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and securing the defensive perimeter surrounding the capital, while buying time to reorganise the ISF and prepare the counteroffensive that culminated with the liberation of Mosul (2017). In doing so, and despite having been accused of gross violations of human rights, of sectarian violence and of being too close to Tehran and the Shia community, they acquired a symbolic dimension far exceeding their status as parallel security forces. With all their contradictions, they emerged from the battle against IS as symbols of unity in a country lacerated by years of war and by conflicting visions of unity.

The Popular Mobilization Forces: An Assessment

Despite their centrality in liberating Iraq from the grip of al-Baghdadi’s forces and the number of studies dealing with them, the PMF continue to represent an extremely controversial issue. Two years after the declaration of victory over IS, it is still difficult to understand whether they could represent a resource for the Iraqi state (once disbanded or fully integrated into the ISF) or if they could contribute to the country’s further destabilisation. In any case, to understand the role of the PMF and their capabilities it is necessary to focus first on their diversity. Their hybrid nature coupled with their inner diversity and

the presence of multiple and often competing agendas make them a reality much more complex than generally assumed.

Although the PMF mainly comprise forces hailing from Iraq's Shia heartland, considering them a solely Shia-related phenomenon does not reflect their nature. The Hashd includes among its ranks groups with different geographical, ethnic and religious backgrounds and in some cases even mixed forces. Yet even when considering Shia-aligned formations only, it is hard not to look at the variety of their positions, interests and capabilities. Among them there are groups formed after Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani called upon Iraqi citizens to defend their country (2014) as well as armed branches of existing parties and militias who fought during the civil war and remained active despite their formal disbandment⁶. Additionally, there are a wide range of criminal gangs that, beyond their ethnic or religious backgrounds, saw in the battle against the "Caliphate" an opportunity to profit and protect their affairs⁷. Such a complex framework was further exacerbated by the presence of multiple and often conflicting loyalties extending within and beyond Iraqi borders. The PMF have widely been associated with external actors, and with Iran in particular, but much less emphasis has been put on their relations with the Iraqi socio-political fabric. If the links between some of the most known and effective PMF and Tehran are undeniable and based on solid evidence⁸, this does not hold true for all of them.

⁶ For the latter, joining the PMF represented the opportunity to stop operating underground, to get effective legitimization and to increase their popular support.

⁷ Various analyses tried to delineate the Hashd variety. Amongst them see F. Haddad, *Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi. State and Power in Post-2014 Iraq*, The Century Foundation, 5 March 2018; International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, Crisis Group Middle East Report, no. 188, 30 July 2018; R. Alaaldin, "The Origins and Ascendancy of Iraq's Shiite Militias", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 22, 2017, pp.150-151; H. Abbas, *The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017.

⁸ M. Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups",

Several groups adopted overt Iraq-centered postures reflecting their direct or indirect linkages with power centers traditionally hostile to external meddling. And this brings to the fore the influence internal politics exerted over them. Despite having in IS their common enemy, Hashd internal equilibriums came to reflect the tensions of the Iraqi political spectrum and the rivalries present especially within the Shia community. Far from being a monolith, this community has always been characterized by the presence of multiple political agendas and orientations. While intra-Shia socio-political competition was evident well before the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime⁹, it became more and more salient over time and especially when the fragmentation of the United Iraqi Alliance (which won the 2005 elections) shed light on the diversity of the Iraqi Shia political spectrum¹⁰. These factors inevitably impacted Hashd formation and evolution, resulting in a web of confrontational relations confirmed by significant intra-PMF standoffs and heightening internal competition¹¹.

The Hashd's variety as well as its conflicting interests and allegiances were well known by the Iraqi political leadership, which, while recognizing their fundamental role in the battle against IS, understood clearly how they could pose a significant threat to the state monopoly of legitimate force. It is in this framework that the government led by former Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi tried to rein in the PMF multiple souls and to submit them to state authority. In the beginning of 2016, while officially recognizing the Hashd as an independent military formation within the Iraqi Security forces, al-'Abadi tried to pass a bill aimed at establishing a national guard to integrate irregular forces on a province-level basis. While the initiative officially

CTC Sentinel, vol. 12, no. 7, August 2019, pp. 1-12.

⁹ R. Alaaldin (2017), pp. 144-49.

¹⁰ P. Marr and I. al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Fourth Edition, Boulder (CO), Westview Press, 2017, p. 203-77.

¹¹ R. Mansour, *Iraq's Paramilitaries Are Turning on Their Own Ranks*, Chatham House, 26 February 2019

aimed at mobilising larger parts of the Iraqi population against IS forces (especially among the Arab Sunni community whose relations with Baghdad worsened dramatically especially during al-Maliki's second tenure¹²), the project was clearly designed to create a counterweight able to dilute Hashd influence within the Iraqi system. The opposition mounted by key political forces close to the PMF sealed the fate of the initiative, leaving the government with no other option than going forward with their further institutionalisation. The process led to the adoption of the Hashd law of November 26, 2016 that confirmed the autonomy of the PMF within the Iraqi Security Forces (responding, at least formally, to the prime minister via the Hashd commission). A new decree issued in March 2018 intended to stress how the PMF had to be considered an integral part of the ISF, entitling them "to the same privileges and monetary compensation as employees of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence, while also subjecting them to the same rules and code of conduct that apply to all state security personnel decree".¹³ Finally, a July 2019 decree issued by new Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi called for formal full PMF integration into the state security apparatuses, apparently bringing the institutionalisation process of the Hashd to a new critical stage.

Critical Resources, Spoilers or What?

Despite their formal integration within the ISF, the Hashd maintain significant levels of autonomy at multiple levels. While the end of major combat operations led several PMF to start processes of self-demobilisation, reorganisation and full integration within the ISF, some of the most powerful Hashd

¹² See K.H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 17, 2014.

¹³ I. Rudolf, *From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units*, International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, 2018, p. 12.

networks seem to have adopted a multi-pronged strategy aimed at guaranteeing their influence within the Iraqi system. Paradoxically, the PMF's growing institutionalisation and integration within state apparatus has represented an opportunity for several groups not only to abandon their status of "non-state-actors" but also to exploit the state for their own aims at levels never reached before. The significant influence exerted by some of the oldest militias, and especially by Iran-aligned groups over the Hashd commission, allowed them to have a say in the distribution of state resources to the different battalions¹⁴ as well as in their training and deployment on the battlefield. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the past, even full integration within the ISF does not guarantee the severing of previous allegiances, with the consolidation of multiple-loyalty phenomena jeopardising the cohesion of the country's security system. Finally, even if all Hashd economic offices and recruitment centers were closed, several key groups would keep benefitting from a wide series of economic (licit and illicit) activities, preserving their autonomy. Monies collected from border-crossings (and checkpoints) apart, several groups successfully re-oriented their presence within the public and private economy, focusing in particular on the reconstruction business (acting as intermediaries or directly through affiliated firms often employing demobilised fighters) and on the provision of services to the population¹⁵. Yet the most striking evidence of PMF entrenchment within the Iraqi system is represented by the crucial role Hashd-related parties play at the political level. Counting respectively on 54 and 48 parliamentary seats, Muqtada al-Sadr's Sayroon and Hadi al-'Ameri's Fatah alliance constitute the two most prominent political forces of the country and exert a significant influence over the Abdul Mahdi government.

¹⁴ In 2017 PMF received \$1.63 billion in government funding for fighters' salaries and to support their military operations. International Crisis Group (2018), p. 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 10-12; N. Ezzeddine and E. Van Veen, "Who's Afraid of Iraq's Hashd?", *War on the Rocks*, 10 September 2019.

Such a scenario inevitably has a significant impact on the Iraqi system. Far from being cornered within the security domain only, major Hashd forces succeeded in transforming themselves into power networks, extending their influence on multiple dimensions. In doing so, they not only reversed the old top-down approach Iraqi leaders adopted towards parallel armed groups but underlined the growing hybridisation of an Iraqi system that, sixteen years after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, is still far from having consolidated its pre-eminence over a wide array of competing power networks¹⁶.

¹⁶ R. Redaelli, *The Osmotic Path: The PMU and The Iraqi State*, ISPI Commentary, 30 October 2019.

Conflict Resolution in Libya: How To Deal with Militias?

Federica Saini Fasanotti, Arturo Varvelli

In recent decades, the phenomenon of armed groups – often referred to as “militias” – which have gained the status of proper non-state actors has represented a common trend in many African and Middle Eastern countries. Instead of nations fighting against each other using regular armies, governments in the Middle East are increasingly relying on irregular or unofficial armed formations which operate in parallel to a state’s security apparatus – or even beyond its control – and outside international jurisdiction. Since 2001, such formations have multiplied, appearing in previously unthinkable places. Hezbollah, for example, has lined up against armed groups in Syria; the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) against Dae’sh; the Houthis against a part of what remains of the Yemeni army; and, in Libya, the contingent headed by field marshal Khalifa Haftar has had Tripoli under siege for months, hemming in the cluster of militias supporting the internationally recognized prime minister Fayeze al-Serraj.

In the face of collapsed or extremely fragile states, the monopoly on force has become fragmented, moving into the hands of many different actors and becoming an “oligopoly” of violence. In many Middle Eastern countries, the pre-eminent feature of the Weberian model of State has suffered a process of dilution, going hand-in-hand with a move towards security “localisation” and hybridisation, as symbolised by the rise and widespread

success of paramilitary groups and sub-state armed actors. However, this process did not simply arise from nowhere, rather reflecting a wide range of situations, such as a divisive and inefficient political system, poor governance delivery by the state, conflict-ridden social contexts or, even worse, a combination of all these factors. While the emergence of sub-national armed entities does not automatically imply negative consequences – sometimes it has even improved security and services for local communities – it is nonetheless a symptom of weak state institutions and competing interests among different power-groups. Economically, such armed groups often obtain vital financial resources from illicit trafficking or external sources of funding. As relations between local armed groups and criminal networks grow stronger, such formations become harder and harder to eradicate or disarm. In other cases, militias are closely linked to political leaders or religious figures, acting as private protection units, guaranteeing access to power and resources, often to the detriment of the central State.

What's Behind the Rise of Militias

The revolution that toppled the Gaddafi regime in 2011 clearly turned quickly into a civil war between those who supported the *rais* and those who did not – but there was also more to it. Widespread instability soon took hold, as the regime's control, which had been in place for 42 years, progressively eroded in the face of blows from rebel formations and NATO airstrikes. Local militias and several armed groups arose, exploiting the chaos to advance their own political agendas or, more simply, to increase their control over territory and resources. Historical rivalries that had never been fully dormant became stronger – hence the clashes between, say, Mishasha and Zintan, Misrata and Tawargha or Tuareg and Tebu – but none of these parties managed to prevail over the others. This uncertainty was exemplified by the lack of a formal structure for coordinating the revolution, with rebel formations acting according to different

loyalties and chains of command. Despite the emergence of the Transitional National Council (TNC), which was a rebel leadership organisation led by the city of Benghazi, historical rivalries and divisions among rebels did not disappear, with the monopoly on force remaining extremely fractured in this phase.

During the months following the fall of Gaddafi, the militias began to consolidate their status in the country. The example of Tripoli is probably the most emblematic: in 2012, about thirty armed groups could be identified, in addition to a constellation of small active units, even on the streets. Meanwhile all attempts to merge those formations into something larger and more structured failed and the July 2012 elections, resulting in the Ali Zeidan government in the following November, did nothing but exacerbate the existing frictions and further weaken the capital's institutions.

In Tripoli, in 2014, the positions of Zintan's militia were attacked by a jumble of different forces, then passed into history as "Libya Dawn"¹. The Zintans were dismissed, and many figures of that coalition increased their influence in the government, also becoming ministers. Then came the time of the Skhirat Accords and the Fayez al-Serraj National Accord Government, but little changed. As new alliances emerged, new clashes took place, and the adage remained that, indeed, the militias acquired even more power under the Serraj administration, becoming proper criminal cartels able to hold entire ministries hostage².

Currently the number of armed fighters stands at more than 250,000, significantly more than during the revolution, when about 30,000 fought against Gaddafi. Militia men receive a good income, most of them even from the government

¹ The forces of Misrata were present - always the best armed and trained militia of Tripolitania - the National Mobile Force with a majority Amazigh, the Knights of Janzur, the men of al-Kikli from the Abu Salim district, as well as groups from Zawiyah.

² W. Lacher and A. al-Idrissi, [Capital of Militias: Tripoli's Armed Groups Capture the Libyan State](#), SANA, Briefing Paper, June 2018.

as official members of the security forces. Given the fact that there are no well-paid civilian jobs available, they remain in the militias³.

A further problem for any reconstruction of the monopoly of force lay in the very nature of those rebel groups involved in the overthrowing of Gaddafi in 2011. They were broken up, confused, very different from each other and incapable of producing a single leader either in those original long months or later, when the influence of external local, regional and international actors definitely spoilt any chance for a true political selection process out of which could have emerged a leader with a clear vision and the ability to lead the country towards a new era. The murder of Abdel Fattah Younes, in this sense, is emblematic⁴. Although his past was as both a military and political figure of high standing in the Gaddafi entourage, when the revolution broke out, he chose to hop sides and support the rebel cause. He was seen by many as a possible alternative in a post-Gaddafi Libya.

The end of “Operation Dignity”, along with the establishment – following the Skhirat Agreements – of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the transfer of the House of Representatives (HoR) to Tobruk, definitively sanctioned the political division of the country between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

In the absence of state control, new entities – the militias – took shape to respond to all those unheeded needs. They precisely represent part of Libyan society as they are independent of any government control, deeply rooted in the territory and hungry for social affirmation and wealth. These armed groups have become a social phenomenon that now, almost a decade on, seems impossible to eradicate.

³ W. Pusztaï, *Conflict resolution in Libya: What works?*, NCUSLR, 2019.

⁴ “Libyan rebel commander Abdel Fattah Younes killed”, *BBC News*, 29 July 2011.

Why They Fight

As Libya emerged from more than forty years of dictatorship, many people who had taken up arms against Gaddafi found it difficult to renounce the power a rifle gave them and return to their previous lives. For many youngsters, militias represented a source of motivation, identity and, above all, income. In his essay entitled “Why We Fight”⁵, former British officer Mike Martin explores the causes that drive men to fight, largely covering psychological and social motivations. Current Libya seems to be a very good case study: most of those who have joined the Libyan militias are male, young, without professionalism and minimally educated. Fighting for a militia helps them boost their sense of identity and fulfil their need to belong. These armed groups have developed in each of the three historical regions of Libya: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. They have become proper para-state organisations committed not only to managing security, but also to numerous “illicit” activities, as already noted, including trafficking drugs and weapons, underhand oil sales and migrant management. Without effective state control, they have proliferated and adapted to the situation, reaching into the very heart of the country.

More than one attempt has been made to make them join the complex process of rebuilding the state, but so far all efforts have proven futile. This is largely because such efforts have been more nominal than real, more “technical” than political. First, there was no process related to the doctrine of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR), particularly because, on the other side, there was no government able to speak with a single voice. It is clear that at the moment any DDR process would be premature, but the time has come to start preparing the ground to change the current militia trend. The disarming of a population is not a purely military fact and it must have deep social, political and economic roots - it is on these that we must start working.

⁵ M. Martin, [Why We Fight](#), Hurst, May 2018.

Libyan Somalization Between Militias and Tribes

The role of the tribes in Libya is both much discussed and little studied. The fall of the Gaddafi regime largely created the conditions for a revival of tribalism or, more accurately, allowed the tribes to once again openly demonstrate their role in Libyan society. However, the nature of this role remains a complex issue. First, it is important to remember that even the tribal system, like any social system, experiences constant transformation over time. Therefore, twentieth-century tribal studies on Libya might provide an invaluable starting point, but they are not – nowadays – sufficient to describe and analyse the function of the tribe in the current Libyan landscape. The processes of sedentarisation, urbanisation, illegal immigration within a regime and civil conflicts contribute to changes in tribal structures, their functions and their ability to be perceived as legitimate social actors.

The current tribal system is made up of about 140 tribes, but only 30-40 of them have a primary social role. The notion of “tribe” (*qabila*) in Libya should not be associated with a sort of ancient social structure of a static nature but should be understood as a sort of wide range of social organisations and forms. More than anything else, in Libya, tribal identities represent a common way of thinking and acting. Tribal culture is nourished by ethical norms, such as solidarity between relatives, that determine tribal identities, or the adoption of values, such as honour or shame, that are not only means of moral judgment, but real institutions and concrete procedures. Some scholars argue that, in the upper and middle class sections of a city, which usually enjoy a higher degree of culture and wealth, tribal belonging has already substantially changed its meaning. In the past it indicated an all-encompassing lifestyle, but today belonging to a tribe means marking an identity or an origin. In these cases, families have chosen to adopt an explicit anti-tribal bourgeois identity, but at the same time continue to pay attention to extended family relationships. Moreover, tribes are not

collective actors governed in a hierarchical sense by authoritarian leaders, and many tribes, especially the larger ones, are segmented into sub-tribes and extended families. The latter, in particular, negotiate relations between and within tribes.

During 2011, the mobilisation of revolutionary militias was largely organised around cities and local areas, but also around tribes or families. Indeed, in many situations and, especially the most restricted ones, the distinction between local and tribal ties is pretty subtle. Localisms and rivalries between “city-states” – meaning local entities that have begun to give themselves a form of self-government to make up for the absence of the Libyan state and the impossibility of the reconstruction of the monopoly on the use of force – have begun to emerge in the post-Gaddafi phase. Owing to their skill and experience as order makers and conflict brokers, tribal politicians have begun to play an important role in local transitional councils, on city military councils and even in militias.

Many have spoken of the “Somalization” of Libya, stressing the risk of strengthening armed groups at the expense of the stability of the country which, as it grows ever weaker, would enter into a dangerous downward cycle of chaos, with an institutional vacuum. The more time goes on, the more difficult it is to return to the starting point. As tensions are becoming more deeply rooted, the few institutions that remain are weakened, corruption increases exponentially and citizens lose all enthusiasm and desire to invest in public good.

The failure to obtain tangible results in this sense has, on the other hand, legitimised the militias to move on different fronts at the same time. Some of these are placed under the control of the Ministries of the Interior or Defense, since they have been informally implemented in the local community from which they were formed. Their exclusion from the negotiation process involving various Libyan actors, managed by the United Nations through UNSMIL, made it impossible to achieve any

political results⁶. They are key actors, like in Tripolitania, and they should be treated that way. An example of the lack of understanding of what is happening in Libya can be found by looking at France and its pushing for elections. In May 2018, President Emmanuel Macron called a conference on Libya – after the one in summer 2017 – inviting four Libyan political representatives seen as fundamental by the international community: the Prime Minister of the GNA in Tripoli (Fayez al-Sarraj), the President of the HoR in Tobruk (Aguila Saleh Issa), the head of the High State Council in Tripoli (Khaled Mishri, known, among other things, for his close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood), and the commander of the Libyan National Army (Khalifa Haftar). In response, many in Libya – mostly militia leaders – dissociated themselves from what was happening in Paris because they felt excluded from the game. Furthermore, by doing so, Macron inevitably weakened the role of UNSMIL and its representative Ghassan Salamé. Consequently, nothing productive emerged from this hobbled strategy.

Militias and Resources at the Centre of a Conflict Resolution Attempt

On the contrary, a co-optation process would have been needed to try to transform these military actors into political actors with clear responsibilities in the process to democratise the country. This was not done and the militias, especially after the attack by field marshal Khalifa Haftar against Tripoli on April 4, 2019, found another new space⁷. The LNA started its siege on the capital after crossing the Fezzan, on the eve of a national conference that was due to be held ten days later in the historic

⁶ A. Varvelli and M. Villa, *Libya between conflict and migrants: rethinking the role of militias*, ISPI Commentary, 1 August 2018.

⁷ W. Lacher, *Who Is Fighting Whom in Tripoli? How the 2019 Civil War is Transforming Libya's Military Landscape*, SANA, Briefing Paper, August 2019.

oasis of Ghadames⁸. As a result of this low intensity conflict, by October 2019, after 6 months of siege, more than 1,000 people had been killed and almost 6,000 others injured, with over 100,000 people displaced.

Haftar's move caught many by surprise, although his history hardly shows a tendency to follow a common line based on political agreements. He has never really been interested in such agreements, as can be seen by the fact that every time he participated in an international conference organised to solve Libyan problems, he returned to his homeland and made military moves.

In Libya the two government contingents – the Haftar LNA and the Serraj Presidential Guard – do not reflect the trappings of a normal national army. They are a cluster of militias that are more or less uniformly trained, with such evident differences that no one in Tripoli even tries to deny the evidence of such heterogeneity. In recent years, Haftar has invested heavily in the LNA, which can be seen, in many respects, as his creation. Additionally, he has not hesitated to perform illegal actions to develop the LNA, earning several accusations of human rights abuses. Furthermore, although he has always professed to be a fervent enemy of Islamic extremism, there are numerous Salafi groups in the ranks of his army. Above all, there is the Madkhali group, whose influence extends to the west, in Tripolitania, through a heavy presence in some militias, such as the Radaa Force of Abderraouf Kara.

These aspects fall within the thorny issue of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR). In Libya, the

⁸ The two sides can be summarized as follows, even if everything can change in a short time, in Libya: for Haftar the 106th Infantry Brigade; 9th Infantry Brigade of Tarhuna; several armed groups from the South, from the West, but obviously above all from the East; rebel elements of Chad and Sudan. For Serraj, instead, the Tripoli Protection Force (TPF); Tripoli Revolutionary Brigade (TRB); Al-Nawasi Battalion; Abu Salim Central Security Forces; Bab Tajoura Brigade; 301st Infantry Battalion; 33rd Infantry Brigade; Halbous Brigade; Osama al-Juwaili's Forces; Al-Maghoub Brigade, see "[Haftar's Assault on Tripoli: What's at stake for Libya?](#)", An Interactive Explainer, *Aljazeera*.

complexity of implementing a DDR project is particularly evident nowadays, especially given the coexistence of local, regional and external dynamics. Domestically, a DDR needs specific provisions that allow militias to shift from a military to a political role. These are, namely, the strengthening of the private economy, the promotion of higher education, and the creation of jobs and empowerment for the young militants belonging to armed groups. Moreover, a DDR is further hindered by the extensive provisions provided to militias by external patrons, including funds, training, and weapons. This international support is a major deterrent to non-state armed groups disbanding and further exacerbates the current situation on the ground. Thus, considering the ongoing conflict and that violence and uncertainty still dominate in Libya, the preconditions for a DDR seem far from becoming a practical solution, at least in the short to medium term.

In light of this, asking the international community to embark on a DDR procedure as advocated by some players actively involved in the Libyan crisis (such as France, Egypt, and the UAE) seems rather far-fetched. Conversely, a more viable option might be the progressive aggregation of militias involved in the fight into a more centralised unit, providing a stepping-stone towards forging an official military corp. Battleground evidence shows that only a few thousand troops from both sides carry out military operations, with militia fighters being constantly rotated to the front and back. This has two main outcomes. First, this swinging process is gradually disaggregating individual Libyan armed groups as unified entities. Secondly, the steady cooperation between different combat units is strengthening inter-militias relations, thus creating the ideal conditions for further consolidation. Especially in Tripoli, many armed groups have demonstrated high levels of flexibility and ability to cooperate with other units under the control of the Government of National Accord (GNA). With this in mind, the international community involved in Libya could launch a major aggregating campaign, aimed at exploiting the common crisis affecting

militias to build a unified military force for the GNA. However, such a goal requires enormous commitment to the GNA such that most (if not all) external support should be focused on it.

At the same time, there are additional points that need to be touched upon when looking for solutions to strengthen the state's sole monopoly on coercive force and to integrate or demobilise sub-national armed groups. It is evident that these bodies, created to control the territory in the absence of the state, have often found affirmation in the criminal sphere. This makes finding alternative sources of funding essential. The militias must have a valid option for them to lay down their arms, otherwise they will never do it. Clearly, one consideration is to design a mechanism to include militia leaders, or at least part of them, in a potential new national army. However, serious reflection is needed – and has never occurred thus far, as stated by Mustafa Sanalla, president of the national oil company (NOC) – about the mechanism for distributing oil and gas resources, since Libya is a “rentier state” which bases almost all of its revenue on the sale of these resources. Redistribution should be more functional so as to improve welfare in the country and kick-start the economy, which is deeply stagnant and limited by the black market.

It is not surprising that part of the game involving internal and external actors is played out around the control of natural resources. However, this aspect – like that of the militias – is not adequately considered during negotiations. While the involvement and reintegration of militias into civilian life certainly pertains to the military and political/institutional spheres, especially in terms of involvement in the new decision-making process and state apparatus, a great deal of attention should also be devoted to the economic dimension. Indeed, greater inclusion of local fighters in the country's economic structures is pivotal as it offers militia members a more credible, sustainable source of income in the medium-long term, and it will help prevent their involvement in the black economy and other illicit activities. When considering the case of a DDR, for instance,

final results are not only dependent on the internal organisation and dynamics of the militias, but also on the actual progress achieved by national governments in terms of economic development, rule-of-law, and transitional justice.⁹ These factors, especially when it comes to Libya, are a prerequisite for, rather than an outcome of, any successful attempt to actively involve militias and local armed groups in the process of state building, including DDR projects. Therefore, besides political willingness, without clear and concrete institutional commitment to create a conducive and more inclusive economic environment, any DDR initiative – or similar ones – will prove ephemeral. As pointed out by the scholar Frederic Wehrey, in Libya this means “bolstering the private sector economy and creating jobs for the young men in militias, through vocational training, higher education, small business loans and other strategies”¹⁰, but all these options appear unrealistic at present. Still, a viable starting point could be found in the fairer and more sustainable redistribution of oil revenues. Indeed, the topic of how the oil industry should be managed and how rents should be redistributed within the multiplicity of Libyan actors (municipalities, regions, minorities, etc.) has not been sufficiently discussed yet. This is clearly a major limitation for any negotiations. Equally important, sanctions requiring the unity of Libyan financial institutions have proven insufficient to avoid their division. Recent military action by Haftar, who controls many of the oil wells and infrastructures but cannot manage their revenues, has a lot to do with the attempt to obtain part of the income from the oil and gas in Cyrenaica. In the past, Haftar tried unsuccessfully to entrust the NOC in Benghazi with the rights to sell the oil and gas from the installations controlled by his forces.

Following this line of thinking, one could consider proposing a model solution for the current crisis that includes both greater involvement of militias (there was an interesting attempt led by

⁹ F. Wehrey, *Armies, Militias and (Re)-Integration in Fractured States*, ISPI Commentary, 30 October 2018.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Egypt in the last year) and granting a percentage of oil revenues to Cyrenaica. Under the Iraqi model, for example, 17% of oil revenues should go to the Kurdish autonomous government. If a fixed quota of the revenue was destined to the branch office of the Central Bank in Benghazi, around 30% based on the percentage of population of Cyrenaica, a lasting ceasefire could be agreed on with the constituencies of the east and probably even a change in Haftar's leadership. Many of the tribes in Cyrenaica do not seem in favour of continuing a conflict that sees a section of their young people fighting for the LNA as part of an increasingly complex siege of the capital.

Conclusion

The Libyan militia landscape remains highly fragmented and fluid, reflecting the kaleidoscopic socio-political context of the country. Additionally, the current conflict between the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) is further exacerbating the internal context of instability and "security atomisation", while forestalling any efforts, especially from the international community, to implement a serious roadmap for peace and reconstruction, including the redefinition of the national security apparatus. Concurrently, it is worth noting that the offensive against Tripoli launched by Haftar's LNA in April – and still ongoing – may in the long run represent a positive factor in a prospective security reform plan aimed at the GNA militias, due to its compacting effect on the latter. In this extremely delicate interplay of alliances and rivalries, however, international players and their support – either subtle or explicit – for the warring parties remain a crucial factor in shaping Libya's future.

Hamas and the “Hezbollah Model” in the Gaza Strip

Giuseppe Dentice

Since its founding, Hamas has had a dual identity as a provider of governance and an armed militia interested in security matters. In fact, after taking full control of Gaza (2009), Hamas undertook a complex process to consolidate its authority over the territory. At the same time, the group underwent a transition from an anti-systemic actor into a hybrid political, social and military player, deeply institutionalised in local and regional dynamics. In light of these peculiarities, in which the resistance movement combined political and armed struggle, Hamas was perceived as an actor similar to Hezbollah. This shift can be explained by Hamas’s ambitions to maintain its position of power in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian territories. This adaptable decision also explains the pragmatic evolution of Hamas’s ideology, in which the group has tried to remain more independent by building or maintaining ties with different countries. So is Hamas adopting a “Hezbollah model” in Gaza? How resilient is this model for Hamas? And what impact does it have on internal and external dynamics? In order to understand Hamas’s logic both as a political actor and rebel group, this article seeks to examine the origins, the organisation and challenges that affected Hamas and Gaza. It will then examine the causes of militancy in the region, focusing on the strong interactions with and differences from Hezbollah in order to trace the Islamist Palestinian organisation’s constant path of

evolution. Lastly, it will provide some recommendations about the group's future goals.

Hamas' Origin, Ideology and Evolution: A Quick Overview

The Islamic Resistance Movement, also known as Hamas (aka *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya*), is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist movement originating after the beginning of the first *intifada*¹ (1987-1993). Since its foundation, and like other Islamist groups operating in the Near East, Hamas has been a resistance movement with a clear final goal: the end of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip – although in its charter its goal was the destruction of the State of Israel. For several years the group was ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt. Nevertheless, during the first *intifada* a shift in its identity drove it away from MB. Earlier the group had been strongly inspired by Iranian Islamic Revolution ideology in 1979². Hamas, or at least its military wing, has been designated a terrorist group by Israel, the United States, the European Union and other Western and Middle Eastern powers.

Its historical leader, as well as its founder and “spiritual leader” was the *shaykh* Ahmed Yassin (killed by Israeli Defence Forces in 2004). Hamas's power structure is hierarchic and deeply centralised, but it has grown more flexible over time. After the first *intifada*, organisation Hamas was organised into four different factions that interacted to give the movement a political line. These four factions can be divided into two main

¹ The Arabic word can be translated as “rebellion”, “uprising” or “resistance”. This definition help to understand the background in which born and evolve the ideology of Hamas.

² See R.M. Rundolph, “The Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine (Hamas): a Successful Transition, but will it Survive?” in A. Van Engeland and R.M. Rudolph (eds.), *From terrorism to politics. Ethics and global politics*, Bodmin, Ashgate, 2008, pp. 81-83.

groups: internal leadership (Gaza, the West Bank and prisons) and external leadership (Palestinians in exile). Hamas’s decision-making centre was represented by the exiled political office in Damascus – following the Arab uprisings in Syria, the movement had to move its bureau to Doha, Qatar. Colloquially known as the *Politburo*, it was historically chaired by Khaled Meshaal. After February 2017, he was replaced by the former prime ministerial authority in the Gaza Strip, Ismail Haniyeh. In parallel to its political structure, Hamas also developed a multilatered organisation in which armed struggle against Israel is combined with delivering social welfare programmes. The Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades are the official armed wing of Hamas (first official action in 1992) and represent the other face of the same coin. The Al-Qassam Brigades have always been one of the most controversial aspects of Hamas, because they have been responsible for terrorist attacks and suicide bombings, mainly against Israeli forces. Their action was particularly important during the 1990s and the second *intifada*, when Hamas expressed its outright dissent from and its own rejection of the so-called ‘Arab-Israeli peace process’ strongly sponsored by the United States. Since 2004, Hamas has also engaged in attempts at political participation within the Palestinian camp, becoming the main rival of Fatah. In 2006, during municipal and legislative elections, the group adopted a dual strategy leveraging both its military and political practices that allowed it to obtain a resounding victory in elections for control of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA)’s legislature. These events were a watershed moment for the group’s identity, because ever since the Hamas establishment has endorsed a process of transformation from a militia to a political player aiming to fill the void left by Yasser Arafat’s death in terms of legitimacy and popular support among the Palestinians³.

³ For more details on ideology, structure, strategies and policy goals, see: Joshua L. Gleis and B. Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A Comparative Study*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, pp. 95-172.

Despite this initial success in terms of popularity and electoral victories, Hamas has only shown minimal capability in managing power and institutionalising state structures. A few months after winning the elections, Hamas's government aroused deep concern in its struggle with Fatah over control of the PNA, which devolved into violent clashes between the Palestinian factions. Moreover, Hamas escalated its confrontation with Israel, which carried out three military campaigns in Gaza in less than a decade ("Operation Cast Lead" in December 2008, "Operation Pillar of Defence" in November 2012, and "Operation Protective Edge" in July 2014). Paradoxically, the bloody conflict in 2014 enabled Hamas to regain support from local populations and within the Palestinian front. These events have shown how resistance can still be an attractive value in the mobilisation of consensus. In addition, Hamas has invested a great deal in new and more effective military tactics in recent years, and during the last conflict with Israel it used them to great effect. It successfully deployed drones and new long-range missiles, but also implemented new tactics (i.e., arson terror balloons) and communication strategies, making its military capabilities evident to Palestinians as well as to Westerners⁴.

Despite the numerous difficulties that arose after taking control of the Gaza Strip, Hamas has attempted to promote a gradual and constant process of transformation from a typical resistance movement to a political actor, much like Hezbollah in Lebanon. The crucial step was in May 2017, when Hamas re-established close ties with Hezbollah after the election of a new political bureau in February 2017, led by Yahya al-Sinwar. This warming of ties once again raises the possibility of cooperation between Hamas and Hezbollah in the event of a war with Israel, paving the way for a multi-front conflict. In this respect, Israel's worst nightmare would be to accept a "Hezbollah model" in Gaza, with strong Iranian sponsorship and the Lebanese militia operating as a military supplier of Hamas. For all these

⁴ "[Profile: Hamas Palestinian movement](#)", *BBC*, 2 May 2017.

reasons, the evolution of Hamas was hindered by Israel, which has grounds to fear that the Palestinian organisation is a dangerous double agent for both the Sunni bloc and Iran⁵.

Comparing Hamas and Hezbollah

There is no doubt that in recent years a large number of non-state actors (NSA) have tried to take on new responsibilities as political players. At the same time, these groups have embarked on a parallel process of downplaying their experiences as armed groups. Essentially, Hamas is trying to change its status from a resistance movement to a political party interested in participating in political processes. According to Benedetta Berti, "[...] armed groups have shown an increased interest in creating political parties to take part in institutional politics"⁶. Indeed, several groups that share numerous features with Hamas (for example Hezbollah, the African National Congress, FARC or IRA/Sinn Féin) have transitioned away from being terrorist organisations (or organisations that use terrorism as a tool to pursue political goals) to position themselves somewhere along the spectrum of where legitimate politics and illegitimate violence meet. In any case, organisation all of these organisations are different in terms of history, ideology, capabilities, and connections with local civil societies. Moreover, every armed resistance movement is influenced by the (geo-)political and social environment it operates in. This means that different internal and external factors can in some way affect the politicisation process and can determine strategic interests, political dynamics and, in

⁵ For further reading, see also: E. Yaari, *Hamis Opts for the Hezbollah Model*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch no. 2263, 2014; M. Koss, *Flexible Resistance: How Hezbollah and Hamas Are Mending Ties*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 11 July 2018.

⁶ B. Berti, "Armed Groups as Political Parties and Their Role in Electoral Politics: The Case of Hizballah", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, vol. 34, no. 12, 2011, pp. 942-962.

general, the success or failure of a transition process⁷. In light of this, it is important to note how Hamas shares many features with Hezbollah. Both groups emerged during the 1980s as Islamist resistance organisations with different religious orientations (Hamas is a Gaza-based Palestinian Sunni group while Hezbollah is a Lebanese Shia group). The two organisations have interacted extensively to preserve their power in the specific political contexts they are engaged in. Hezbollah and Hamas continue to share a common vision in defeating Israel, adopting approaches based on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Hamas and Hezbollah have developed wider connections and networks within civil society, where they have achieved broad popular legitimacy⁸. According to Sarmad Ishfaq,

both groups have a well-defined organisational system akin to a military's, which engages employees in a systematic manner and ensures proper execution of orders. They both have strong leaders and leadership structures that promote democratic centralism to subdue dissent. Although Hamas' leadership was divided along moderates and radicals when the question of politicization arose, democratic centralism ensured all leaders obeyed the end decision. Hezbollah, too, has a collegial leadership structure but it appeared more coherent on politicization perhaps due to a lack of internal-external leadership schism like Hamas' and also due to the predominant clerical mindset of the leaders. Lastly, both organisations enjoyed (and still do) massive public support due to humanitarian efforts aimed at the local population. This is why both parties have had success in elections and are even today one of the primary political parties in their respective countries⁹.

Moreover, Hezbollah and Hamas each have a military wing that respectively functions outside the borders of the Lebanese state

⁷ A. Van Engeland and R.M. Rudolph, *From terrorism to politics. Ethics and global politics*, Bodmin, Ashgate, 2008, pp. 9-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ S. Ishfaq, "From Arms to Ballots: The Politicization of Hezbollah and Hamas", *E-International Relations*, 2 June 2019.

and the Palestinian National Authority. In addition, they both have an independent military capability that has allowed them to maintain their positions of power. Historically, Hezbollah offered military training to Hamas combatants, made political recommendations to the organisation and encouraged Hezbollah-affiliated media platforms to support Hamas and the Palestinian cause. The two groups were so close that Hamas had offices and residences for several of its high-ranking officials in Beirut's southern suburbs, an area known to be Hezbollah's stronghold. Hezbollah's influence over Hamas was mainly based on its closer relationship with Iran and its ability to serve as an important link between Hamas and Tehran. In fact, both groups were direct recipients of Iran's military and financial aid. As affirmed by Zvi Bar'el in *Haaretz*, "The important similarity between the two organisations is that both have become part of the establishment"¹⁰. In fact, like Hezbollah, there exists within Hamas an effort to develop stable institutions of government and societal organisations. At the same time, Hamas continues to adhere to resistance ideology, which results in a prolonged war of attrition against Israel¹¹.

Strong Interactions but Different Transitions

This emphasis on the confrontation with Israel also highlights the great structural divide between the two organisations. Hamas and Hezbollah use the concept of resistance as a core principle of their ideology and identity, even though there are differences in how each organisation reinterprets and applies this concept. Both consider resistance mainly as military action to fight Israel. This variable represents the most important feature of

¹⁰ Z. Bar'el, "Hamas May Be Flattered by Hezbollah Comparisons, but the Challenges It Faces Are Far Greater", *Haaretz*, 18 November 2018.

¹¹ D. Baracska, "The Evolutionary Path of Hamas: Examining the Role of Political Pragmatism in State Building and Activism", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2015, pp. 520-536.

identity, allowing Hamas to replicate the Shia-Lebanese model in the Gaza Strip. Both use resistance as a final goal against Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon and in the Palestinian Occupied Territories. This denotes a dual notion of the concept of resistance in terms of deterrence and the end of oppression, as well as an offensive and defensive tool. But while Hezbollah uses the term resistance as a tool to reinforce and reinterpret the power of governance, Hamas defines this duality as part of a permanent conflict. If Hezbollah has defined a new step in its conception of power, in which it has developed like a state within a state – an important result obtained thanks in part to its political and military involvement in the Syrian civil war –, this reinterpretation of the resistance hasn't happened with Hamas. Since its rise to power, the Sunni Palestinian organisation has shown an adaption to and flexibility within different situations dependent on multiple internal and external variables.¹² This sophistication allows Hamas to play an influential role in Palestinian politics and to some extent in regional dynamics as well, but this evolution has not enabled it to become a full provider of governance, much less a fully independent actor in foreign policy. Misquoting Jonathan Spyer, if Hamas is a “quasi-sovereign Islamist entity”¹³, Hezbollah has achieved and reinterpreted this status. In fact, within Hamas the political and armed wings are in competition because the political bureau is aware of the difficulty of being both a provider of services and rebel group. In Hezbollah this emphasis has been overcome by domestic and regional events. Hezbollah has defined a unique model of governance, while Hamas has not gone anywhere near to making a similar transition, in part due to its weaker political and military capacity. While the Lebanese organisation made a more or less complete transition from resistance movement to political party – although a dual, flexible approach persists as a rebel group and political actor –, this process is still evident in

¹² M. Koss (2018).

¹³ J. Spyer, “Facts on the Ground: The Growing Power of Hamas’s Gaza Leadership”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2012, pp. 44-51.

Hamas, which remains a peculiar case study. In light of this, it is possible to argue that Hamas has promoted a politicisation process without achieving full success. This means that Hamas has not completed its identity transition and is still engaged in a process of transformation, relying on several political factors (internal and external). For these reasons, Hamas appears to be an adaptable actor unable to update its identity¹⁴.

From "Rebel Activism" to a "Pragmatic" Foreign Policy Agenda

Hamas' allegedly pragmatic approach reflects the group's political priorities. Its stance must be analysed and understood in the light of Hamas's foreign affairs agenda, in which the group's main aim is achieving a tactical and strategic independence between the Sunni bloc (led by Saudi Arabia) and the so-called 'axis of resistance' led by Iran and Hezbollah. Like the latter, Hamas's identity is fully embedded in the Arab-Israeli context. This means that certain shifts in this dynamic have a direct impact on both the Lebanese and Palestinian scenarios. Before the Arab uprisings Hamas and Hezbollah were close allies in the axis of resistance against Israel. After the Syrian civil war began, Hamas left Syria and began criticising the Assad regime, upsetting the military wing, which remained deeply reliant on Iranian financing and Hezbollah training. The relationship rapidly worsened. This is where the main difference between Hamas and Hezbollah emerges. While the Lebanese Shia militia operates more or less as a proxy for Iranian interests, Hamas has tried to achieve the status of independent actor. This shift was crystal clear after the election of a new Hamas leadership in February 2017. Since then, ties between Hezbollah and Hamas have improved, in part thanks to the adoption of a new statute in May 2017, in which Hamas broke ties with the Muslim

¹⁴ See also: D. Baracskay (2015), pp. 532-534; J.L. Gleis and B. Berti (2012), pp. 173-183.

Brotherhood and stated that escalating or de-escalating resistance is part of a strategy of managing conflict.¹⁵ In this sense, Sinwar's choice was reconnected to a dual political logic, internal and external to Hamas. In addition to the renewed close ties with Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas' leader, Yahya al-Sinwar, decided to fully restore relations with Egypt and to expand relations with the other Arab regional powers (Saudi Arabia and the UAE, *in primis*). Although innovative and functional to the political priorities of the group, Hamas's allegedly pragmatic approach would be mainly aimed at guaranteeing a sort of temporary tactical survival. Moreover, renewed ties with Hezbollah and Iran have reduced Hamas' diplomatic isolation in the Middle East and redefined its strategy around a new concept of struggle based on popular resistance. The resumption of cordial relations with the Sunni bloc may also help alleviate the dire humanitarian and economic conditions in Gaza. Basically, Hamas is trying not to depend on a single partner, but to expand its relations in terms of tactical alliances to gain some practical advantages. Last but not least, this political pragmatism is also a functional factor in the Gaza governance dimension, because it could be an important strategy in strengthening Hamas' leadership in the presence of new political and security threats.¹⁶

What's Next for Hamas?

At the moment, Hamas is at a crossroads. The group is a 'hybrid' actor, meaning it is no longer only a party or a militia. At the same time, Islamism and militarism are tired pretexts for legitimising and fortifying the weak foundation on which its

¹⁵ See also: H. Ghaddar, "[The Marriage and Divorce of Hamas and Hezbollah](#)", *Wilson Center*, 26 August 2013; T. O'Connor, "[Iran allies Hezbollah and Hamas may unite against Israel and Trump's Jerusalem decision, report says](#)", *Newsweek*, 27 December 2017.

¹⁶ G. Dentice, "[The Egypt-Hamas deal: a piece of the changing regional puzzle](#)", *Aspenia online*, 30 November 2017.

governance is based. Moreover, if Hamas opts to implement the "Hezbollah model" in Gaza, it will also have to accomplish a complete transition toward becoming a political party, institutionalised in the political dynamics of the Palestinian camp and with low internal tension. This is mandatory in order to re-launch itself as a full political player, interested in an intra-Palestinian reconciliation that could also facilitate full responsibility for negotiating a political confrontation with Israel and a future role in the evolving Middle East. However, this evolution has to take place according to Hamas's ideals and not merely following in the footsteps of Hezbollah or other influential players/allies. In fact, this step is fundamental in order to keep the 'Hezbollah-isation' of Hamas from turning into an incorporation of the Palestinian group into the strategies and political goals of the Lebanese group, becoming its *de-facto* branch in the Near East. In this process independence could be the crucial value to guarantee Hamas's survival in the Gaza Strip. In brief, this could be the right approach to overcoming its status as merely a "resistance actor" and to becoming a "quasi-state actor" like Hezbollah.

Fragmentation and Multiple Political Orders in Yemen

Maria-Louise Clausen

Political order in Yemen has always been defined by a weak central state and strong non-state actors. But while Yemen has survived crisis before, years of internal conflict and more than four and half years of military intervention by the Saudi-led coalition have left Yemen more fragmented than at any time in recent history. The government headed by President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi has almost no authority as Yemen has been divided up into localities where different local groups – each with its unique dynamics and identity – hold territorial control or are engaged in contestation.

In September 2014, the Iranian-aligned Houthi movement took control of the capital, Sanaa, from the internationally recognised president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Shortly thereafter, in March 2015, a coalition led by Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm with the stated aim of restoring to power President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had by then been forced into exile and was based in Riyadh. The coalition made some initial advances, pushing the Houthis back from the Southern capital of Aden, but the war has largely been locked in a stalemate for years. Moreover, the conflict has resulted in an unfathomable humanitarian disaster with more than 90,000 reported fatalities from the war¹.

¹ ACLED, BREAKING: Yemen War Death Toll Exceeds 90,000. According to New ACLED Data for 2015, 18 June 2019.

The conflict in Yemen is often described as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but while its regional aspect has been growing in importance, internally, it is made up of multiple interlinked conflicts. Old animosities have been revived and new cleavages have emerged, to the point where Yemen is best described as a plethora of local political orders. These local and regional conflicts and cleavages will not be solved by a peace agreement between the internationally recognised government and the Houthis. Instead, a future Yemeni state must somehow find a way to mediate between the many local actors while finding a way to prove that central authority has something to offer in the Yemeni context.

Saleh and the Patronage State

The current situation in Yemen is shaped by Yemen's recent state-building history, which is dominated by former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (in power from 1978 to 2011) but also draws on narratives that go further back in time or are specific to individual geographical areas. These historical grievances and experiences act as an important backdrop to current events.

The Yemeni state had many of the trappings of a modern state, but although there were formal institutions, these were often secondary to Saleh's patronage network. Inclusion into Saleh's network, more than a formal state position, determined access to resources and the ability to get things done. But the formal and informal institutions could not be separated as the most sensitive state positions were controlled by a close-knit group that included several close relatives of Saleh. Moreover, the security sector was dominated by personnel from the northern highlands who were also loyal to Saleh and his closest associates.

Historically, tribes have provided an alternative to state-based order, and in some areas tribes continue to provide a degree of social cohesion, regulate conflict and establish a basic

level of justice². There is a strong tradition of tribal mediation that has successfully negotiated local peace agreements and which could have further potential if these mechanisms could be constructively applied. These include avoiding co-optation by local elites. The current collapse of the Yemeni state has led some Yemeni to turn towards their tribes again, especially in the northern highlands and in some southern governorates such as Shabwa. However, although tribal values remain strong in some areas of Yemen, tribal structures have weakened. Saleh was able to integrate tribal leaders into his patronage system in exchange for their loyalty. As a result, some tribal leaders looked towards Saleh while neglecting their tribal duties.

Although Saleh was renowned for his ability to play off different actors against one another, diminishing resources and growing discontent in both the north and south of the country made it increasingly obvious from the early 2000s that Saleh's regime was under pressure. Mounting economic, political and security challenges paved the way for the uprising in 2011 which forced Saleh from power. The uprising resulted in a negotiated transfer of power from Saleh to the transitional president Hadi, Saleh's longtime vice-president, but allowed Saleh to remain politically relevant through his network and to form an unlikely alliance with the Houthis.

Saleh remained a key part of Yemeni politics until he was eventually killed by the Houthis in 2017, but parts of his network continue to be involved in the conflict. These include the remnants of the General Peoples Congress (GPC), a party formed by Saleh in 1982. However, the GPC network is weakened and dispersed between those who have remained in Sanaa under Houthi control, independents in exile and factions loosely aligned with President Hadi. In a sense, although patronage remains an ordering principle for political order in many places, it now lacks the centralising figure that Saleh once was.

² N. Al-Dawsari, *Tribal Governance and Stability in Yemen*, The Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012.

Instead, it is a patchwork of localised networks interacting and competing with each other. This underscores how state-building in Yemen cannot be approached simply as a matter of re-establishing state institutions that have temporarily been muted. Indeed, the collapsed transitional process of 2012-2014 illustrates how it will be necessary to come up with more realistic and context-sensitive approaches that bring in local perceptions of legitimacy³.

The Houthis and Rebel Governance

Whereas the Houthis' fighting capabilities had been honed through consecutive rounds of fighting the Saleh regime from 2004 to 2010, the uprising in 2011 gave the Houthis' political wing the opportunity to develop its platform and enter the national political scene. The political wing participated in the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), a mechanism of the transitional agreement aimed at bringing Yemen's many groups together to discuss the future Yemeni state. However, while the Houthis were engaged in political dialogue, they were also waging a military campaign, pushing south from Saada, their northern home governorate, towards Sanaa. The Houthis took control of Sanaa in the autumn of 2014. The Houthis had entered into an alliance with former president Saleh, and this alliance is key to understanding how the Houthis were able to take over so much of Yemen's territory in the spring of 2015. Gradually, the better-trained security forces loyal to Saleh were integrated within the Houthis' more fluid security structures, resulting in an adaptable network-based structure controlled by the Houthis⁴. However, while the Houthis have controlled the northern highlands without partners since the death of Saleh in

³ P. Salisbury, *A Multidimensional approach to restoring state legitimacy in Yemen*, International Growth Center, August 2018.

⁴ P. Salisbury, *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order*, Chatham House Research Paper, Chatham House, 2017, pp. 13-14.

December 2017, they have done so in an increasingly authoritarian manner.

Initially, the Houthis presented an agenda focused on economic development, political inclusion and the eradication of corruption. This agenda earned the Houthis some initial support, especially since they could present themselves as a truly independent actor. The Houthis control key state institutions and have created new political structures as part of their rule. These political structures might be seen as illegitimate or as mere coating on an illegitimate insurgent group, but as it seems increasingly likely that the conflict in Yemen will end with a negotiated settlement, transforming the Houthis (back) into a political party will be key for securing sustainable peace⁵. In terms of service provision, the Houthis initially presented themselves as an alternative to the highly corrupt previous regime. However, now that the Houthis are responsible for collecting taxes and providing security and services, they are accused of seeking to monopolise power and state resources, thus prioritising their military wing over building a strong civilian structure⁶. This, combined with the blockade and the continuing Saudi-led air campaign, has hampered the Houthis' ability to provide services. Consequently, key public services such as health and education are faltering, while people struggle with a lack of jobs, rising prices and limited security under Houthi rule⁷.

The Houthis' relationship to Iran has played a key role in how the group has been approached. However, the Iranian role in Yemen has been overstated in the sense that the Houthis do not operate strictly in a proxy capacity. Their political goals are rooted in the Yemeni context and they primarily pursue

⁵ M.C. Marshall, "Foreign Rebel Sponsorship: A Patron–Client Analysis of Party Viability in Elections Following Negotiated Settlements", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol 63, no. 2, 2017.

⁶ M.-L. Clausen, "Competing for Control over the State: The Case of Yemen", *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2018.

⁷ Yemen Polling Center, *Perceptions of the Yemeni Public on Living Conditions and Security-Related Issues*, May 2017.

local objectives. Nevertheless, Iranian influence has been growing since 2015⁸. While the Saudi-led military intervention sought to destroy the Houthis' missile capability, it seems that the Houthis' ability to target Saudi Arabia has increased since the commencement of the military intervention in 2015. The Houthis' ability to challenge Saudi Arabia is part of their appeal in Yemen as the Saudi-led intervention is perceived by some as more of a war *on* Yemen than an intervention in favour of the Yemeni state⁹. Still, tensions between the Houthis and the strong northern tribes have been on the rise since the Houthis killed Saleh, thus underscoring that there are cleavages in northern Yemen. It is possible that some of the actors who are currently accepting Houthi rule would revolt if given a realistic alternative, especially if there was no longer a common enemy¹⁰.

Separatists and the Southern Transitional Council

There is a strong but diverse secessionist movement in southern Yemen. Yemen was formed in 1990, when the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) or North Yemen and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) or South Yemen agreed to unite. However, relations between the two entities quickly deteriorated and in 1994 a civil war broke out which the former South lost. Southern Yemen subsequently experienced political and economic marginalisation. This led to growing discontent, resulting in protests that gained traction from 2007 under the umbrella of Hiraq al-Janoubi, or the Southern Movement, commonly referred to as Hiraq. This movement is highly

⁸ T. Juneau, "Iran's Policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: A Limited Return on a Modest Investment", *International Affairs* vol. 92, no. 3, 2016; E. Kendall, *Iran's Fingerprints in Yemen: Real or Imagined?*, Issue brief, Atlantic Council, October 2017.

⁹ International Crisis Group, *Discord in Yemen's North Could be a Chance for Peace*, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁰ M. Al-Deen Shuja, *The Houthi-Tribal Conflict in Yemen*, Sada Middle East Analysis, 2019.

diverse, reflecting social, economic and historical differences, including political rivalries rooted in historical events that took place before the unification of Yemen.

In 2017, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) was formed. The STC is headed by the former governor of Aden, Aydrous al-Zubaidi, but also includes other experienced politicians. The STC has been able to build capacity with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Consequently, the STC has a substantial presence on the ground in and around Aden, including influence over state institutions¹¹. This presence relies, among other things, on its affiliated security forces, the Security Belt Forces, which also receive equipment and training from the UAE but are formally placed under the Yemeni Ministry of Interior. The leader of the Security Belt Forces is the deputy secretary of the STC, Hani Bin Breik. In Aden, the military capability of forces loyal to the southern separatist movement exceeds that of Hadi's government, and has, at times, operated in direct opposition to the Yemeni government¹². In January 2018, the STC directly challenged Hadi, and since then there have been growing tensions which escalated into serious armed confrontations in August 2019. At the time of writing the situation is still unresolved.

Importantly, the STC does not enjoy the same level of support across all southern governorates, and other factions within the southern independence movement are wary of the STC while some are concerned about the growing influence of the UAE. The STC, on its side, has made a strategic effort to position itself as the champion of the southern independence movement. It has also worked to build external support¹³. The

¹¹ T.B. Parker, "Fighting for Legitimacy: The Dueling Sovereignties in Southern Yemen", *Fair Observer*, 20 August 2019.

¹² M. Jerret, "Rise, Fall, and Rise Again: Perspectives on Southern Yemen Security Challenges", in M.-C. Heinze (ed.), *Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen: Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-Conflict*, Carpo Report, 20 December 2017, pp. 27-32.

¹³ The STC has for example established an "Office of the General Administration

linkages between non-state actors in Yemen and foreign backers can facilitate the ability of non-state actors to act independently of state institutions or even to directly challenge state authorities.¹⁴ Hence, the direct involvement of regional actors – most notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whose diverging priorities in Yemen are becoming more obvious by the day – not only has the potential to influence the current situation but also raises questions about the structure of the future Yemeni state.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Yemen

Yemen is home to one of the more active branches of al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which was established in 2009 through a merger of the Yemeni and Saudi branches of al-Qaeda. The presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen has often defined Western, and especially American, policies towards Yemen, but inside Yemen, during Saleh's regime, it was frequently argued that al-Qaeda was more of a tool in the hands of the elite than a serious threat to the regime. Within this narrative, Saleh manipulated the al-Qaeda threat in order to gain access to US economic and military aid¹⁵. Although the main concern for the US was AQAP's ability to carry out, support or inspire a number of high profile attempts to take down airliners as well as other international attacks, AQAP is essentially

for Foreign Affairs of the Southern Transitional Council in the European Union" where one can read more about the southern cause and the STC, <https://stc-eu.org/en/>

¹⁴ M. Transfeld, "The UAE is weakening its partnership with the Saudis in Yemen. Here's why it matters, Monkey Cage Analysis", *The Washington Post*, 28 August 2019.

¹⁵ S.G. Phillips, "Making al-Qa'ida legible: Counter-terrorism and the reproduction of terrorism", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2019; M. Jerret and M. al-Haddar, "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula: From Global Insurgent to State Enforcer", Hate Speech International, 2017.

focused on local issues and attacks¹⁶. Although many of AQAP's key leaders have been killed in one of the 328 confirmed US air strikes in Yemen since 2009¹⁷, the organisation has grown in strength, with numbers reportedly increasing from several hundred in 2010 to around 4,000 in 2015.¹⁸ Concurrently, AQAP has seized weaponry from military camps or through the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis. AQAP was able to control Mukalla, Yemen's fifth largest city, for a year, from April 2015 to April 2016. During this period, the city was controlled through local administrative bodies, some of which included non-AQAP members. Local community leaders were reportedly involved in a negotiated withdrawal of AQAP from the city, which helped avoid a potentially damaging military offensive and allowed AQAP to retain its operational capability. Moreover, AQAP has worked with some tribes to oppose the Houthis in situations where the Houthis threatened tribal land.¹⁹ Thus, AQAP has sought to avoid being overly aggressive and has instead worked to build relations with local communities. This has included a focus on service provision, such as improvements to local infrastructure, limiting corruption and employee absenteeism, and providing a basic, although harsh, level of security²⁰.

Islamic State (IS) formally established itself in Yemen in November 2014 but has struggled to gain a stronghold in the country. It is estimated to number around 150²¹. IS regularly

¹⁶ M.-L. Clausen, "Islamic State in Yemen – A Rival to al-Qaeda", *Connections*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2017.

¹⁷ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Strikes in Yemen".

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the base*, Report no. 174, 2 February 2017, p. 9.

¹⁹ N. Al-Dawsari, *Foe Not Friend: Yemeni Tribes and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula*, Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED), 2018.

²⁰ C. Swift, "Arc of Convergence: AQAP, Ansar al-Shari'a and the Struggle for Yemen", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 5, no. 6, June 2012, pp. 1-6. See also H. Radman, *Al-Qaeda's Strategic Retreat in Yemen*, Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies, 2019; and P. Salisbury, *Yemen: Stemming the rise of a chaos state*, Chatham House, 25 May 2016.

²¹ International Crisis Group, *Yemen's al-Qaeda: Expanding the base*, Report no. 174, 2 February 2017, p. 9.

claims responsibility for deadly attacks, most recently in August 2019 where it targeted a police station. These attacks have the potential to destabilise the political situation and underscore the lack of security. However, IS' organisational structure and inability to adapt to the Yemeni context leaves it much less integrated with Yemeni society. Nevertheless, it is feared that the current power vacuum benefits AQAP and IS, and, indeed, the two groups exploited the infighting in the south during August 2019 by scaling up their level of activity.

The Future of the Yemeni State

While Yemen is still recognised as a unified country and has a government that claims control over most of the national territory, local authorities and non-state actors often act independently of the state. Consequently, disintegration is a real possibility as Yemen is currently little more than a collection of entities held together by internationally recognised borders. The longer the conflict continues, the stronger vested interests become on the ground. A future Yemeni state will have to convince these local actors that it is in their best interest to submit to a central authority if peace is to be sustainable.

The reality is that today many functions associated with the state are carried out by non-state actors. These include tribes, armed groups and even militants such as AQAP, each of which, to a greater or lesser extent, engage in service provision based on different modes of governance and varying degrees of internal legitimacy. These local actors may seek to coerce local populations, but this is seldom effective in the long run, making it necessary to seek the support or at least the acquiescence of local populations. Consequently, some of these local actors surpass the central state in terms of internal legitimacy as well as capability. An example of a relatively successful local authority, in terms of level of security and service provision, is found in

Marib²². The Marib governorate is home to a substantial part of Yemen's natural resources and its governor, Sultan al-Arada, has been able to generate income from oil and gas sales. The governor has managed to keep a larger share of the revenues inside the governorate, which, in addition to some external support, have been used to uphold and improve the functioning of local government. Marib is characterised by a relatively strong and cohesive tribal structure which, allied with the governor, has taken on security responsibilities, including preventing the Houthis from taking over the governorate. Hence, the tribes have assumed a greater role in providing social services, while tribal customary law has taken the place of civil law. This in turn allows tribal leaders more authority over the lives of tribal members. Consequently, Marib, although formally under the control of the internationally recognised president Hadi, operates largely independently of Hadi's government. Other areas, such as Hadramawt and, to some degree, Mahra, likewise operate with high levels of independence although formally under the control of the Hadi government.

This underscores that we are unlikely to see a strong centralised Weberian style state emerge in Yemen in the foreseeable future. Instead, political order will need to incorporate the fragmentation of the Yemeni state by seeking to find a balance between central government and local authorities. This will require a delicate balancing act between the demands of different political actors on the ground, including the armed groups that have grown in strength during the war.

²² See A. Baron, *The Marib Paradox: How one Province Succeeds in the midst of Yemen's war*, EFCR Policy Brief, 2018.

3. Armed Non-State Actors: Human Security and the Challenges to Civil Society

Hafsa Halawa

At its core, civic engagement and the role of civil society is a pillar that keeps democratic institutions strong and provides the checks and balances that complement legal and constitutional structures. Democratic societies – such as those found in the developed West – are defined by open, thriving civic empowerment which allows citizens to engage on a variety of levels and issues, including local, national, or international causes. Such activity ensures healthy civic debate and participation. Civil society is therefore the backbone that keeps politicians and institutions transparent and honest, and ensures the respect for and implementation of social and democratic norms that allow society as a whole to thrive.

In autocratic systems or under authoritarian rule, such civic engagement is threatened both practically and as an idea. Public and civic space is an early casualty in such scenarios, sacrificed during moments of social unrest to endorse undemocratic measures, and implement a type of majority rule that dissuades or even physically threatens civic engagement.

These risks are further exacerbated during civil conflict, or in times of war. As violence ensues, security diminishes, and social cohesion is threatened. The most vulnerable communities (usually women, children, those with disabilities, and the elderly) can become further ostracised from society and cut off

from community engagement as the influence of civic actors is curtailed. Whether through intimidation, threats, or direct violence, the public space disappears when insecurity is high, and trust deficits emerge both within communities and towards armed actors. Security and safety becomes the primary commodity, and civilians are willing to trade public space and civic engagement in exchange for short-term protection provided by the armed actors (state or non-state) in the ascendancy during a conflict. In such cases, the humanitarian support provided by major international safety nets becomes the main legitimate form of engagement.

As a result, local engagement is not only extinguished in the short-term, it is threatened in the long term as well. Where armed actors acquire power over communities by providing security, civilian commitments to broader freedoms fade into the background. This is especially true for armed non-state actors, which do not adhere to the rule of law or conventional rules of engagement, and over which there is no formal state control.

Civil Society and Inclusion in Syria

Since the democratic uprising of 2011 gave way to civil conflict, Syria has been carved up into many small and large areas controlled by local and international armed non-state actors, and by the Syrian military under Bashar Al-Assad. During the last nine years of conflict, Syria has been a playground for countless groups – numbering at least 1,000 at their peak – and has been ground zero for the war against Islamic State (IS)¹.

Throughout this time the strength of civic movements and organising has fluctuated: it has ascended at times, but also been used as a political weapon and tool, and has risked extinction. The enormous pressure civic actors have lived under has exhausted local communities. Nevertheless, such engagement remains active in the country, reflecting the powerful resilience

¹ L. Sinjab, *Guide to the Syrian Rebels*, BBC News, 13 December 2013.

of the Syrian social fabric, and that of its financial backers and the Syrian citizenry as a whole. Civil society is only as strong as the community which it purports to serve, and the dire need for the engagement of unarmed civilians to diffuse the threats posed by armed actors has given these actors an extraordinary amount of power and visibility.

Although this should not to be interpreted as an endorsement of such a model, and while civic actors should never become directly engaged in conflict or in negotiating the rules of engagement, the incredibly fluid nature of the Syrian conflict – which has seen not just a plethora of actors but continued rounds of power-grabs and consolidation efforts in various areas across the country – has forced groups to position themselves as a local interlocutor. It has engaged directly with armed groups, whether with regards to local governance issues or broader conflict resolution or access agreements.

Civil society has managed to quietly position itself as a viable negotiating partner, as major actors such as the UN face difficulties and political and diplomatic issues affect others. In Idlib, we have seen examples in the form of taking on the responsibilities of governance and service delivery in direct competition with armed actors vying for power and control of that area. In Aleppo, we have seen these actors at the forefront of negotiating directly with one armed group over another for access corridors and aid delivery. Thus, these actors have, at times successfully, used armed actors – when needed – to advocate for the release of detainees and has directly inserted itself in broader conflict resolution efforts, even as the international mechanisms for peace negotiations remain in place.

Furthermore, Syrian civil activism has proven adaptable to the conflict and the crisis. With more than half the population displaced – including many civic actors themselves – a burgeoning diaspora has brought with it a large organising community that has shifted its geography, and in some cases its focus, in continuing to serve the Syrian people. This includes peace-building and service-delivery for IDPs and refugees,

support for young women, psycho-social support to victims of war and the displaced, and educational services for refugees.

Whilst groups that have worked in Syria should be heralded for their heroism, they are not in an enviable position. Activity has been decimated, and has fought as much for its own physical survival as for its constituents. The war has been devastating for all Syrian civilians, but it has also placed an unbearable burden on this sector.

Placing such burdens on unarmed non-state actors remains a vicious cycle that repeats itself endlessly during war. Being unarmed, they are exposed to violence, either making them the weaker party by default, or forcing them to take up arms. The borders between civil society, rebel groups, and armed militias blur, especially when all are vying for public trust or competing for control or power.

The main deficiency of the examples discussed above is that they relegate any local needs beyond humanitarian suffering to the margins of the national debate. Whilst unarmed non-state actors have played relevant roles in local peace-building or conflict resolution efforts at the local level, especially in terms of the delivery of services and humanitarian aid, they are increasingly marginalised during protracted conflicts, or at the regional and national levels. Throughout history, civic engagement defined in many ways by the activity of women and other local actors have been excluded from formal peace negotiations or access agreements, which focus on bridging the gaps between violent armed actors. Indeed, the Syrian example has shown us how formal peace tracks can be abused to favour one side (in this case the Syrian regime and its international backers) and give it the diplomatic cover to continue to wage war.

This is most notable for those societies at war, who have a history of both authoritarian rule and exclusionary social practices. Women and youth are notably left local and national peace talks in Syria, and continue to be relegated to informal circles that represent a token effort on the part of the international community to endorse the engagement of women, minorities

and youth, instead of achieving meaningful participation. This Syrian regime has a long history of acting in a similar manner, using violence, sectarianism, legal protection and nepotism to create trust deficits and social vulnerabilities, while using violence to quell vertical trust deficits between citizens and the ruling class.

Meaningful and Inclusive Reconciliation in Iraq

Iraq has been beset by cycles of violence and conflict since the ill-fated US-led invasion in 2003, which removed autocrat Saddam Hussein from power. In the 16 years since, the country has been defined by sectarian politics, civil conflict, geopolitical schisms, and corruption. An exclusive nature of politics has ensued, which has produced a Baghdad-centric approach to security and stability – generally imposed by the international community and its partners – which has marginalised civic engagement, leaving it to fend for itself at the local level to try to improve the lives of ordinary citizens. Peace and reconciliation efforts continue to be stalled, notably by the lack of any internationally recognised peace process and by recurring waves of violence and conflict. As such, historical grievances passed on from one generation to the next linger, only to be forgotten as new grievances emerge from the ongoing conflict and from Iraq's most marginalised provinces. Enduring political stalemate between the governments in Erbil and Baghdad has also contributed to the slow progress on the reconciliation agenda.

No commission or any other mechanism for reconciling grievances from the Saddam-era exists, nor have there been genuine attempts at inclusive political processes since, beyond what is imposed by what is colloquially known as the “US constitution of 2005”². As a result, the posturing between Sunni,

² This mainly refers to the apportionment of minority positions within the governing roles of the country, including parliament and the presidency, the cementing of Kurdish autonomy in the KRI, the quota of female representatives in

Shiite and Kurdish politicians continues, contested areas in the country remain fragile and caught in the crossfire of political battles, minorities continue to lack adequate representation, and women remain absent from political space beyond the legislature (they are notably left out of the executive branch). As the cycles of violence have increased in their intensity, there have been even fewer efforts to address the issue of meaningful peace, and no attempts to ensure any process is inclusive.

Despite the continued violence, and sectarian nature of both conflicts and politics, civic engagement has remained consistently strong in Iraq post-2003. This is reflected in citizen engagement and electoral participation³. Relevant activities include: advocacy, direct service delivery, reconstruction, conflict resolution, healthcare and education support, and support in the domain of housing, land and property. Specific focus has continued to remain on the poor and on victims of war, including internally displaced persons – IDPs – and refugees from neighbouring countries (currently, mostly Syrians)⁴. Civic

parliament, and the introduction for a reconciliatory referendum over the contested areas in the country, namely Kirkuk province.

³ In 2018, voter turnout dipped to 44 percent on average across the country in both the federal parliament and Kurdish regional parliament elections. A record low turnout for Iraq, which has consistently seen, since 2003, high voter turnout averaging 66 percent of eligible voters. See [IFES Iraq Election Guide](#) for further information.

⁴ This has disproportionately affected certain parts of the country, with Dohuk in the KRI under intense pressure from both IDPs from neighbouring Ninewah province and one of the largest Syrian refugee camps in the country. Other provinces like Kirkuk, Erbil, Ninewah, Salaheddin, Diyala, and Anbar are also burdened with similar plights and numbers of displaced that has placed financial pressures on the local provinces governing authority to provide basic services, both in/out of refugee/IDP camps. It also provides a platform for skewed numbers and confusion over the actual numbers of displaced. Despite being as accurate as possible, the IOM tracker (tracking movement of IDPs/refugees in Iraq), has failed to acknowledge the numbers of those who move “outside of the system”. Eg: Following government orders, two main camps in Kirkuk province were closed down, housing mainly Hawija IDPs – the numbers of those who have left these camps have been registered are returnees, however the vast

engagement is also contributed to (albeit negatively) through the arming of non-state actors, mainly ordinary citizens (and notably young males)⁵.

However, this space is increasingly threatened, and organised engagement is declining of late. Turnout in the 2018 elections, in federal and Kurdish region elections, dropped to its lowest level since 2005, a warning sign that civic engagement is beginning to wane as the monotonous nature of Iraqi politics and the strain of the security environment takes its toll. Recent protests across the country, leaderless and lacking direction, point to real anger against the entire political class⁶. Whilst civic actors continue to work largely outside of the political sphere, they are beset by challenges imposed through recent ascensions to power of new actors on the security level (addressed below), inconsistent and non-complementary regulatory policy from Baghdad and Erbil, and genuine inability to implement policy owing to physical and financial challenges.

Furthermore, the centres of power of Baghdad and Erbil are wedded to the narrative of security and its solutions, ignoring the effect of war on citizens, and relegating civil society to a minor role in the peace process. Discussions on the “future of Iraq”, held mostly in all-male fora between politicians who rarely travel outside the capital and their international counterparts, have focused on a security-first approach to moving the country forward – namely, the low-hanging fruit of no violence equals peace. Through this approach, women are largely if not completely absent from political negotiations on reconciliation, and are left on the margins, unable to address grievances that go to the heart of the violence that has raged over the years.

In fact, the nature of the security landscape has now shifted, as the political will exists for honest and holistic security

majority have disappeared from the system, self-displacing themselves outside the system in Kirkuk City. Recorded as returnees, they remain IDPs.

⁵ A. Plebani (ed.), *After Mosul, re-inventing Iraq*, Milan, Epoké-ISPI, 2017; estimates put PMU (NSA) fighter figures at anywhere between 75,000-130,000

⁶ H. Halawa, “Rage in Baghdad”, *Mada Masr*, 13 October 2019.

approaches that can set a course for the country that goes beyond merely delaying the next round of conflict. However, at the local level, far from the halls of the federal government, the drivers of future conflict remain worryingly strong. Without the engagement of civil society at the highest political levels, these drivers cannot be tackled coherently, and ultimately another round of violence is inevitable.

The superficiality with which the current landscape is assessed disproportionately affects women and youth for a variety of reasons. Women are now – in many cases – the breadwinner for families, and responsible for the well-being of their children and extended families (including elders). Many of them force their younger children – predominantly girls, as boys are encouraged to attend school where families can afford it – to drop out of school and work to support their family. For a rising number of cases in areas liberated from ISIS, women who wish to return are being prevented from doing so by poor HLP laws and local power fiefdoms preventing them from establishing ownership of property. Many women are also complaining about their inability to obtain citizenship documents for themselves, or to prove citizenship for their children⁷.

Women are largely victims of the many crimes of war, notably those that happen on the periphery of war or worse, in “peace time”, during which levels of local violence actually tend to rise, particularly gender-based violence. More broadly, local issues go unnoticed and are absent from the national discourse, and even where national reconciliation may be achieved, local grievances are not taken into account effectively to ensure this effort trickles down.

The absence of female and minority voices in reconciliation attempts or the broader political narrative ensures that their grievances remain unaddressed. It also ensures that local issues that plague post-conflict areas remain ignored. This can

⁷ This, despite a 2004 law that allows Iraqi women to pass on their citizenship to their children, regardless of the father's nationality.

manifest itself as local level violence in the form of petty theft and crime, or gender-based-violence (both domestic and sexual-based), which remains undocumented and unmonitored, and leaves its perpetrators unaccountable. Women and youth are disproportionately exposed to violence whilst being continuously absent from the security discussion. Minorities are further disenfranchised in a culture of fear, led by armed non-state actors, or unfair political treatment that entrenches stereotypes as civilians retreat into familiar (and smaller) echo-chambers that further cement grievances. Continuing rounds of violence and the consequent grievances are therefore likely inevitable – regardless of national discourse – as insecurity is left to fester, particularly where the perpetrators of such violence are those within the security apparatus themselves.

The Post-ISIS Security Landscape in Iraq

Currently, the areas liberated from ISIS require the most urgent attention, particularly in the reconstruction of major cities. This includes service delivery, reconstruction of state services, local administration, courts and other offices, businesses, and housing, so as to encourage internally-displaced citizens to return while ensuring they will have access to services and opportunities to earn a livelihood when they do. These are services that must be provided by the government, with unarmed non-state actors is not equipped to do so, particularly as concerns desperately needed legal services and access to resources. Recent budgetary debates in parliament show that the political elite continues to blindly ignore these critical issues, something that is not lost on citizens from particularly needy areas.

Furthermore, the focus of such activity on conflict resolution also remains temporary, and support is provided to those areas with the highest number of IDPs or refugees, a policy that arguably does not achieve the most efficient use of resources⁸.

⁸ At its peak, there were over three million recorded IDPs inside Iraq. Whilst the

Whilst it is inevitable that many IDPs will not return to their areas of origin (as seen in previous conflicts, and initiating large demographic shifts across the country), millions already are and eventually will, and these current conflict resolution techniques fail to take into consideration the reintegration of these citizens with their original neighbours and communities. These challenges are compounded by the lack of support from the political sphere and conditions imposed for the sake of security. One community for which this is particularly true are the Yazidis, who hail mainly from Sinjar in Ninewah province.

Following the alleged genocide perpetrated on the community by ISIS in August 2014, thousands are believed to have been murdered, and thousands more are still missing having either escaped or been taken into captivity by ISIS⁹. For the thousands of IDPs and refugees (the “missing” are believed to be in Syria, but there is no official confirmation of this), the adjustment to displacement has brought with it some troubling questions. As they merge into communities in places such as Dohuk in the KRI or other parts of Ninewah province, they (notably children), have been introduced to new ways of life that appear alien to their own traditions and culture. Although there is a positive argument to be made here – that those Yazidis are both empowered and integrating strongly within Arab and Kurdish societies – there is little consideration for the reaction

official number for September 2019 is 1.5 million (as per the IOM Displacement Tracker for 2019), owing to self-displacement or non-registration it is believed the number remains much higher. This number also only takes into account the most recent conflict and does not record official number of IDPs from previous conflicts over the past two decades.

⁹ Estimates vary, and with no documented census in Iraq, neither full population figures nor official recordings can be gathered in relation to the size of the minority, or the number of those affected directly by IS. (This also applies to the general population across Iraq, and more recently to the IDP community). While the community itself contests up to 3000 Yazidi women and children are missing, there is no official way to corroborate the numbers. Mass graves are also being found at an alarming rate, confirming the massacre of mostly men and boys at the hands of IS.

that awaits them at home if/when they should return. As a very conservative and small community, that has been largely marginalised and secluded from the rest of the country for decades, signs are already showing that the new opportunities for employment and cultural changes experienced by these IDPs are incompatible with the Yazidi traditional way of life, as expressed by community leaders in their areas of origin¹⁰.

Sunni women in particular have found themselves marginalised and in some cases prevented from returning to their areas of origin after being displaced as part of the fallout in the war against ISIS. Whilst since 2014 a great many joined ISIS, or accepted living under ISIS rule, there are those who didn't. However, in the post-ISIS landscape there is little to differentiate between the two, and little to encourage nuanced approaches to the vast number of Sunni women. This means both violent women who carried weapons and worked as part of ISIS remain undifferentiated from those who lived under ISIS or fled. Sunnis across the country often suffer from direct or indirect accusations of ISIS affiliation, as linguistic tag-lines of "ISIS

¹⁰ Notionally in the continuing debate on "IS children" – those children born to IS fighters whilst their mothers were sex slaves under IS. Following a statement from the Yazidi Spiritual Supreme Council in April 2019 that the community would welcome back "all its Yazidi women and children", the statement was later revoked and amended to confirm that this would not apply to those children born to rape, at the hands of IS. Competing with a significantly detrimental Iraqi law that does not recognise children as Yazidi, unless both parents are themselves Yazidi, the social stigma – and local uproar over the initial statement - forced the leadership to revoke its position. It has now been clarified to only encompass those Yazidi women and children kidnapped and abducted by IS, leaving hundreds of women who have given birth as a result of rape by their captors unable to return to their communities unless they abandon their children. Whilst the draft law, as released by the President does not highlight those women specifically, it does look to encompass them within the reparations bill, and as such is now politically at odds with the community's own leadership. It should be noted here, that the marginalisation suffered by the Yazidi's in Iraq for decades has been part of an "Arabisation" policy instituted by Saddam Hussein. The post-2003 has not fared them much better, with respect to political representation, equal rights and visibility.

brides”, “ISIS children”, and “ISIS-affiliates” become the norm. Such accusations are even made against second- and third-generation descendents of Sunni women, and certainly ignore the differences between those who joined ISIS willingly, those who were forced into captivity, and those who fled following an attempt to live under ISIS rule¹¹.

While the new political mandate granted to Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi shows positive signs that politicians understand the urgency of genuine attempts at reconciliation to avoid another war, there is little understanding among this elite of how to achieve this. Challenges are compounded in the post-IS landscape by an emboldened security domain, largely dominated by armed non-state actors, both formally and informally recognised. The most powerful of these is the collection of militias that make up the formal “Hashd al Shaabi” (or PMUs), who have effectively seized a great deal of power from civilian political actors, using proxies and local affiliates and financial backers to impose themselves onto the political system, beyond their material security control.

The reality of the challenges posed by the PMUs and their activity in the country, however, is a much more localised issue than the hand-wringing going on in the capital. It is also a complex narrative reflecting the grievances of many citizens. Fuelled by a nationalist “call to arms” by the Shiite leader Ayotallah Sistani, PMUs have become a paradoxically toxic element in local governance¹², as an originally – and still predominantly

¹¹ P. Taub, “Iraq’s Post-ISIS Campaign of Revenge”, *The New Yorker*, December 2018.

¹² Although the Hashd had already been formed/was being formed as a political militia, the Fatwa was made by Grand Ayotallah Sistani in 2014 after the IS takeover of Mosul in June 2014, as the extremist group expanded its territorial control and threatened to move towards Baghdad. The Fatwa called for civilians to take up arms to fight for the country, and support the fight against IS. In part, this led to the widespread creation of the PMUs through various militia’s set up in response to the call to arms to fight IS. As the fatwa itself wasn’t specific, a plethora of PMU militias have been created, many with different leaders – some alleged to be aligned/supported/financed by proxy actors in the country, namely

– Shiite force of male fighters that has embraced nationalist rhetoric are being portrayed the protectors of the nation against the rise of ISIS.

In liberated areas, the presence of the PMUs dominates local security and governance. This has created local fiefdoms where power vacuums have been filled by PMUs militias, and remain largely unchecked by national authorities. A recent government decision to embrace the PMUs and formally recognise them as part of the broader national security apparatus has increased their power, but this decision has come with little forethought for its impact on local communities under their control¹³.

In Sunni-majority Arab and Kurdish communities re-taken from ISIS, PMUs have worked to insert themselves into the local landscape¹⁴. Not only is insecurity rising, with indiscriminate accusations of “IS affiliation” being made, but legal favour is being apportioned in a sectarian manner. Furthermore, the nature of these communities and their representation is slowly changing. Evidence is emerging of the “Shiaisation” of certain areas, as PMUs move their families and extended communities into them, and introduce Shia religious symbols – including mosques and “*Husseineyas*” – celebrations, and holidays that segregate society into their original inhabitants and the newly displaced. This is particularly notable in areas that are controlled by the most sectarian Shia factions of the PMUs, some of which are believed to be influenced by Iran or the most powerful Shia leaders in Iraq.

The effect of this shift is directly detrimental to civil society activity. Furtherance of social and political goals prevents inherently non-discriminatory activities amongst those actors, attempting to work under the internationally-recognised

Iran and its Revolutionary Guards.

¹³ A. Mamouri, “Shiite militias react angrily to decree integrating them into Iraqi forces”, *Al-Monitor*, 8 July 2019

¹⁴ Most liberated areas, such as Mosul or Hawija have Sunni populations that number well over 90 percent of the local population. This includes Arabs and Kurds living in these areas.

humanitarian mandate of “Do No Harm” as local PMU factions impose restrictions, or direct nepotism within organisations that provide certain livelihoods, political leaders in local authorities are encouraged to enforce similar practices. This is ultimately breeding a culture of corruption and nepotism leading to continued marginalisation and disenfranchisement, particularly for communities in remote rural areas away from urban centres.

Civic actors themselves have reported incidents of intimidation, a culture of threats and impositions or prohibitions on activities. Issues are increasingly compounded by PMU efforts to “respond” to local cultures and trends¹⁵. The establishment of PMU groups such as the “Sunni Hashd, Yazidi Hashd or Kurdish Hashd” in areas re-taken from ISIS has only exacerbated community tensions. It has emboldened certain tribes at the expense of weaker ones, and further marginalised the least influential sectors of society. From local community leaders to the positions of mayor and governor, the culture of nepotism and local-level corruption is reaching peak levels in some areas, including Anbar, Kirkuk, Diyala, Ninewah and Salaheddin provinces¹⁶. Sadly, this comes at a time when citizens from these areas are at their most insecure and exhausted – from violence and victimisation in war, and from sectarian narratives and language.

Working within civil society amid a heightened militarised culture of governance is proving a significant challenge for NGO workers and the citizens they are committed to helping. This is a difficult terrain to navigate, which brings into question the guiding principles and nature of support whilst openly struggling with the increasing need to provide services. Being a large, eclectic, and unarmed non-state actor also means there is little leverage or power for such a group to act upon. As larger

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by the author with local and international civil society actors working in Iraq, January 2018 – August 2019.

¹⁶ The ongoing politics in Kirkuk is especially fraught, as IS sleeper cells continue to conduct attacks and Kirkuk’s local representation at the heart of both intra-Kurdish political disagreement, and between Erbil and Baghdad.

groups with guns and growing political power look to govern local areas, those in unarmed spaces are left unable to influence or work for the good, and are increasingly bereft of safe spaces.

The inherent lack of educational services and job opportunities for so many citizens in the hardest-hit areas continues to drive the support and burgeoning size of the militias, as the civilian population is increasingly armed. Worryingly, it is not necessarily the citizens that are joining militias who are taking up arms. Growing numbers of ordinary citizens are arming themselves in an attempt to protect their homes, families and communities in the face of security vacuums. The example of Hawija City is notable, where the Iraqi security forces and local Hashd groups abandon security outposts during night-time hours, owing to the frequency of ISIS attacks (although the city has been retaken, ISIS still conducts daily targeted attacks on security positions and assassinations of local leaders). Anecdotal evidence shows that many citizens in and around the main city have introduced a self-imposed curfew, with male members arming themselves in an effort to protect their families.

Such instability and insecurity hampers civic engagement and connected activities as a whole. The broader emergence of a culture of mistrust, doubt and fear prevents representatives from reaching the most vulnerable citizens, as the latter retreat within their own families and communities and seek neither help nor assistance, and refuse it when it is offered. A broader culture of mistrust, owing to rumours and conspiracy theories related to questions of nepotism, government alliances and data collection also work to deter beneficiaries from receiving support. Most importantly, this makes peace and reconciliation efforts at the local level – spearheaded by these organisations – all the more difficult, as groups of families and citizens shut themselves in, fostering stereotypes about others in their own communities, or IDPs themselves, or believing conspiracy theories about organisations and their sources of support. Social cohesion efforts are thus diminished¹⁷.

¹⁷ This is evident in areas such as Sinjar, where it is assumed that the international

Without these groups supporting and buying into peace efforts, these challenges linger and are left to civil society itself to address and solve. With its new and more powerful security actors controlling many power centres, the post-ISIS landscape is becoming ever more challenging for unarmed non-state actors to navigate. Though limited by their obligation to follow a plethora of local, provincial, regional and national regulations related to their activities, international organisations are the backbone of local support and legitimacy. With travel requests, activity permissions and even demands to access beneficiary data becoming commonplace throughout Iraq, and little response to complaints on the part of either Baghdad or Erbil, organisations are choosing to enact severe restrictions on their movements, or act outside the ambit of legal procedure, exposing them to increased risk. The impact of this type of work is continuously impeded by a lack of political will to openly support such groups and advocate for their efforts¹⁸.

community – with all the media attention – cares only for the Yazidi population of Sinjar, and marginalises the Arab Sunni population found mostly in rural parts of the district. Questions of access, quality of support and widespread nature of the type of support has fed into rumours, conspiracies and accusations. This includes the Yazidi population allegedly refusing some CSO activity in the area, where it could benefit Arab Sunni's they view as traitors who betrayed them in 2014. This leaves in its wake a vicious cycle of accusations and conspiracies that becomes impossible to upend.

¹⁸ Whilst the situation is arguably much more amiable to civil society within the KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), civil society continues to suffer as the various tussles between Erbil and Baghdad persist. This includes a lack of coherent policy on NGO registration, or streamlining of efforts between Erbil/Baghdad – different areas require different permissions, and as new councils are set up, left defunct or non-functioning in Baghdad, local leaders impose their own measures and demands. This however, remains on the administrative level. It does not add in the complexity of requests, demands and at times attempted bribes, that are part of navigating the local landscape among security actors. .

Conclusion

In a security environment where peace and stability is viewed solely through the lens of no persistent violence, there is little room for civilian actors to put forward mechanisms or impose efforts to bring holistic peace and reconciliation to the table. For a country where civic engagement has been celebrated since 2003, the effects of this most recent conflict and the post-ISIS landscape that has emerged have led to some of the most significant challenges to social cohesion since the 2003 invasion. Compounded by a decrease in civic engagement and record-low voter turnout in recent elections, public support for political institutions is waning. All of this only acts to increase the power of security institutions, which detrimentally affects the ability of unarmed non-state actors to deliver on their own mandates and support civilians across the country.

As recent conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen have shown, without meaningful and inclusive peace processes – with representation for minorities and equal space for women to engage – and national policies that ease access to services and the implementation of activities while bringing civic actors to the negotiation table and legitimising a mandate, civil society will not only remain significantly at risk, but it will also continue to face challenges to fulfilling its mandate. Additionally, the sector cannot continue to carry the burden of civilian well-being, security, social cohesion, and employment opportunities alone.

In the short term, logistical obstacles must be lifted, and national processes implemented for all actors across the country, removing the element of surprise and the risk of corruption at the local level. Civil society should be empowered by including it in the national dialogue and supporting its successes at the local level. Recognition of its efforts and evidence of its successes should be regularly presented to the highest governmental offices, especially to further participation in peace processes.

Furthermore, funding restrictions on Iraq should be eased, and the international community should impose – both

materially and diplomatically – stringent controls on the country's spending power, notably to push for reconstruction, de-mining and other material issues necessary for the reconstruction of war-torn areas and the return of displaced persons.

In the long term, a holistic mandate supported by all political actors across the country should both allow such engagement without fear or risk and bring those unarmed actors into the security discussion as representatives of the most vulnerable strata of society. Their experience in the important fields of social cohesion, peace and reconciliation at the local level can be brought to bear as part of a broader national reconciliation mandate or a truth and reconciliation commission (as seen in other countries, such as South Africa or Tunisia).

Civil society is the backbone of fair and just societies. It is also the most trusted partner in post-conflict peace and reconciliation efforts. In the various conflicts cited above, these actors play a transparent role, and aims to bring to light local issues, undocumented cases of violence and the unmitigated activities of state and non-state actors. This role comes with great risk, and many pay with their livelihoods, and sometimes their lives. Armed non-state actors in particular actively hinder civil society efforts to document local situations, or intimidate them into submission, sorely testing civil protection and security.

As we have seen, in conflict zones where this balance exists, this type of organisation is easily sacrificed – powerless against armed actors, including at times the state itself. But it is only through inclusive, holistic engagement from the very start of any peace negotiation that the power of armed non-state actors can be mitigated through the transparent, honest and balanced role that genuine civil society fills.

4. The Vulnerable Class and Support for Violence in the Arab World

Raj M. Desai, Tarik M. Yousef

Micro-analyses of political violence tend to focus disproportionately on those who personally commit acts of terrorism or engage in militancy, while ignoring the far larger group of individuals who simply lend their tacit approval to militias. The focus on the active militia members, for example, disregards those who may sympathise with the violent pursuit of a cause, but who do not undertake any violent actions themselves. More importantly, since combatants are constrained by how much cooperation they receive from supporters, understanding the motivations of these sympathisers is critical. Recognising the gradations between support for and participation in militias requires an appreciation not only of the processes that transform some individuals into militants, but of the reasons that non-violent citizens come to support and protect militia groups.

In this note we share some survey evidence from the Arab world showing that the group for whom the appeals of political violence hold sway are not the poorest segment of society, as commonly understood, but rather the most vulnerable segment of the lower-middle class, whose share in the population appears to have risen in the past decade along with the spread of political protests, militancy and internal conflict. This evidence squares with other findings from Latin America, Southeast Asia and South Asia on the relationship between individual income and support for violence. We argue that the principal reason for

these appeals is that this “vulnerable class”, in the wake of decades of structural adjustment and muddled reforms in low- and middle-income Arab countries, has less access to social protection at present than any other cohort.

The poorest, for example, are increasingly eligible for targeted social-assistance programs paid from general revenues. The rich and, increasingly the upper-middle class, on the other hand, are more likely to benefit from contributory social insurance programs and accumulated savings. Those in-between, by contrast, are unlikely to benefit from unemployment or social safety protections that are part of state-sponsored social insurance schemes, nor are they eligible for cash transfers and other targeted transfers for the poor. Moreover, reforms in non-oil exporting Arab countries have reduced access to food and fuel subsidies, as well as public employment, rendering this vulnerable class increasingly resentful of both the rich and the poor, as well as of a political system in which they perceive little stake.

Mobilisation and Violent Movements¹

Perspectives on mobilisation for political violence point to the role of individual incentives, opportunities for rebellion and expectations of gains from violence. Widespread social discontent, hardship, or inequality triggers groups to mobilise. In analyses of violent mobilisation, grievance-based arguments feature prominently in “relative-deprivation” theories in which both non-violent and violent activities depend primarily on the degree of anti-state sentiments. Frustration with the existing political system, and scepticism toward the ability to initiate

¹ We do not attempt here to survey the extensive literature which is done in R.M. Desai, O. Anders, and T.M. Yousef, “Signaling Dissent: Political Behavior in the Arab World”, Working Paper, Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics, 2018. Key references include: P. Collier and A. Hoeffler, “On Economic Causes of Civil War”, *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1998, pp. 563-73; and T.R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1970.

change from within, leads to activities that challenge the legitimacy of the current political order.

Other models of insurgency, terrorism, and collective political violence operate from a resources-oriented perspective, which assumes that individuals who engage in nonviolent political behaviour are more likely to have access to assets such as time, income, information and relevant skills. Therefore, the politically engaged are expected to have an above-average socioeconomic status. As political activities are costly, individuals will consider both how much they care about the outcome and the likelihood that their participation will influence the result.

Comparative studies of political behaviour typically find that the requisite skills and resources needed to facilitate conventional political participation also stimulate anti-governmental activities, and that protest is more common among better-educated and wealthier citizens. Similarly, resource-based theories also posit that individuals' choices about whether to support (or join) terrorist groups, revolutionary organisations or insurgencies depend on the tradeoffs between the likelihood of successful rebellion and the opportunity costs of political violence. In this regard, the calculus of violence is analogous to rational-choice models of criminal activities². Just as wealth is negatively associated with criminal behaviour, individuals facing poverty and exclusion are more likely to support anti-state actors who aim to overthrow the existing order and are more likely to respond to inducements in the form of money, prestige and other spoils.

Moreover, the relationship between access to resources and propensity to participate in collective political violence is assumed to be linear. Several investigations cast doubt on this. Although low per-capita income is one of the more robust cross-national determinants of the risk of internal conflict,

² This point is emphasized by S.M. Murshed and M.Z. Tadjoeeddin, "Revisiting the Greed and Grievance Explanations for Violent Internal Conflict", *Journal of International Development*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009, pp. 87-111. On the tradeoffs facing individuals see S. Skaperdas, "Warlord Competition", *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2002, pp. 435-46.

sub-national, household and individual-level evidence is often mixed or at odds with cross-national evidence³.

Survey Evidence from the Arab World

We rely on two nationally-representative surveys of the Arab world: the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Gallup World Poll (GWP). These surveys were conducted in several waves, mainly between 2009 and 2014 (although the WVS did survey a small number of countries in the region between 1999 and 2009). There are two key reasons as to why we use questions in the surveys that ask the extent to which a person thinks violence for political purposes is “justified”. First, surveys obviously cannot ask about respondents’ personal involvement in crimes, including violence against the state. Neither survey, therefore, asks about direct participation in political violence. Second, support for (as opposed to participation in) political violence is an important outcome in itself. In any given setting, the number of sympathisers usually outweighs the number of participants by several-hundred-fold. More supporters implies more recruits into violent groups.

The WVS and GWP each include different versions of the same question regarding support for political violence. In the WVS the question is posed as follows:

Here’s one more statement – how strongly do you agree or disagree with it? Using violence to pursue political goals is never justified.

Responses are coded 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (disagree), and 4 (strongly disagree). In the GWP the question is stated slightly differently:

³ Micro-level exceptions include, for example, C.C. Fair, N. Malhotra, and J.N. Shapiro, “Islam, Militancy, and Politics in Pakistan: Insights from a National Sample”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2010, pp. 495-521.

Some people think that, for an individual person or a small group of persons to target and kill civilians is sometimes justified, while others think that kind of violence is never justified. Which is your opinion?

Possible responses are: “never justified”, “sometimes justified” or “it depends”. Because of the different scales, we code both questions in the extreme, that is, 1 if the answer was “strongly disagree” (WVS) or “sometimes justified” (GWP), 0 otherwise.

We use available measures of income: a respondent’s household income (GWP) or income decile (WVS). Household income is converted into (constant) US dollars per month. Incorporating both earnings-based and quantile-based indicators of income allows us to measure the effect of absolute as well as relative indicators of wealth on political behaviour. Keeping in mind the drawbacks of relying on self-reported income, however, it is important to utilise an alternative measure of status. We rely, therefore, on different versions of the Cantril “self-anchoring” scale, which asks respondents to place themselves on a “ladder”, from best to worst, that evaluates their life satisfaction. The Cantril Scale is used on the premise that measurement of status is multi-dimensional and that respondents evaluate their well-being according to multiple criteria⁴.

The propensities to engage in different political actions raise the possibility of non-linearity in the relationship between wealth and support for violent actions. Figure 1 shows these relationships. In particular, surveys show that those in the 2nd income quintile (i.e., the 2nd from the bottom) are the most likely to support violence for political ends. The cohort with the highest risk of support for militancy are not the poorest, but rather, the “vulnerable” segments of the lower-middle class. This relationship holds empirically even when controlling for a

⁴ See E. Diener et al. “Incomes Differential Influence on Judgments of Life Versus Affective Well-Being”, in E. Diener (ed.), *Assessing Well-Being*, Heidelberg, Springer, 2009. Cross-national evidence, moreover, shows strong correlations between the Cantril Scale and income at both the individual and national levels.

host of variables including age, gender, education, marital status, religious orientation and urban/rural residence⁵.

The Rise of Vulnerability and Inequality

While the world's global middle class has been increasing in size, and the fraction of those considered extremely poor has been falling, the vulnerable class share in total population has remained relatively constant. Most of the extreme poor have seen their incomes rise, and over time they have become vulnerable – that is, no longer poor, but still not able to join the ranks of the middle class. Meanwhile, some of those who were considered vulnerable have joined the middle class – but not nearly as many as those members of the extreme poor who have become vulnerably poor. Meanwhile, some who have risen from vulnerable to the middle class may have fallen back into vulnerability. In other words, being a new member of the global middle class is a precarious thing. An illness, a recession or an ecological or natural disaster can all plunge new middle-class members back into poverty.

Recent evidence from the non-oil exporting Arab countries suggests that the size of the middle class, which remained stable during the 2000s, has declined in the present decade, especially in countries that faced political turmoil and economic crises⁶. More importantly, the size of the vulnerable population appears to be increasing, reflecting a trend that began before the Arab Spring protests. New multidimensional poverty indicators, encompassing health, education and level standards for ten Arab countries suggests that around two thirds of the population are

⁵ See R.M. Desai, O. Anders, and T.M. Yousef (2018) for a more complete conceptual and empirical analysis of patterns of dissent in the Arab world including political participation and support for violence.

⁶ UNESCWA, “Arab Middle Class: Measurement and role in driving change”, New York, United Nations, 2014.

either poor or vulnerable to poverty⁷. This finding is consistent with growing shares of the population identifying themselves in surveys with the lower classes and helps explain why Arab countries exhibit the lowest self-reported levels of life satisfaction and optimism of any region in the world⁸.

Compounding the problem of heightened vulnerability facing the lower middle class are growing signs of rising income inequality and limited intergenerational mobility, which have been linked to rising political discontent and social polarisation. Recent research on income distribution within the Arab countries, for example, reveals that it is among the most unequal regions on earth, with large levels of inequality both within and across countries⁹. Education outcomes have improved in recent decades, converging to their expected levels of economic development. Yet qualitative gaps remain, particularly among lower income groups and disadvantaged minorities, or in underserved rural areas¹⁰. And unlike other regions, improvements in education have not translated into economic mobility.

Fractured Social Protection Systems

Why have social protection systems in the Arab world failed the vulnerable class? In the West, the growth in the middle class occurred alongside an expansion in a universal social safety net.

⁷ K. Abu-Ismaïl, *Multidimensional Poverty Index for Middle Income Countries: Findings from Jordan, Iraq, and Morocco* Technical Paper, United Nations, 2015.

⁸ N. Krishnan et al., *Uneven Odds, Unequal Outcomes: Inequality of Opportunity in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington D.C., World Bank, 2016.

⁹ The top income decile in MENA receives 64 percent of regional income, as compared to 37 percent for Western Europe; 47 percent for the United States and 55 percent for Brazil. See A. Facundo, L. Assouad, and T. Piketty, "Measuring Inequality in the Middle East 1990-2016: The World's Most Unequal Region?", *World Inequality Database*, 2018.

¹⁰ See B. Hana, E. Lust, and M. Woolcock, *Trust, Voice and Incentives: Learning from Local Success Stories in Service Delivery in the Middle East and North Africa*, Washington D.C., World Bank, 2015. On the link between education and mobility, see N. Krishnan et al. (2016).

Social “protection” – the collection of policies designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by limiting people’s exposure to risk – was used to tamp down radicalisation and social upheaval among the industrial workforce and its accompanying political movements: socialist parties and revolutionary communes. By contrast, in most developing nations, social protection tends to be fragmented, temporary, or highly targeted toward specific groups of individuals (mostly the extreme poor) and financed by general budget revenues rather than contributions. Therefore, the vulnerable class has little stake in a system of social assistance from which it has been typically excluded.

The emergence of social protection systems in the Arab world coincided historically with the emergence of new states in the post-independence era. These states focused initially on the wide provision of food and energy subsidies and expanded access to public health, education and employment which helped articulate the nature of the social contract. Remittances from expat workers in the Gulf and Europe subsequently became an important source of income for families. But in response to rapid population growth and multiple economic and political shocks since the 1990s – oil price and commodity shocks, fiscal retrenchment and economic mismanagement – social protection systems overtime became more selective and targeted, pushing growing segments of the population into socioeconomic vulnerability. The phasing out of subsidies and the increase in conflicts in recent years have further reinforced these trends¹¹.

In particular, the weak performance of labour markets has been blamed for reducing the opportunities for mobility and exacerbating vulnerability. With public sector employment increasingly selective and opportunities in the formal private sector limited, job seekers have been pushed increasingly into long spells of unemployment and/or the informal sector where social protection is minimal. The vulnerable working class appears to

¹¹ See the collection of articles on “Social Protection After the Arab Spring”, *Policy Focus*, vol. 14, no. 3, International Policy Center for Inclusive Growth, December 2017.

be precisely the group for whom informal employment has increasingly become a permanent status, as well as the group for whom returns to education are the lowest¹². For those languishing in low-pay, informal employment with little prospect of mobility to the formal sector, we would expect the feelings of discontent and the appeals of militancy to be strongest.

Implications for Policymaking

A cornerstone of efforts by bilateral and multilateral donors, as well as a host of NGOs, social enterprises and other organisations in conflict-affected Arab countries, has been the focus on employability and entrepreneurship. This is understandable given the high, persistent rates of youth unemployment – especially among educated young people – combined with low labour-force participation rates among women, low rates of small business start-ups and limited access to credit. By now, a vast number of initiatives and programs across the region have sought to help alleviate these constraints.

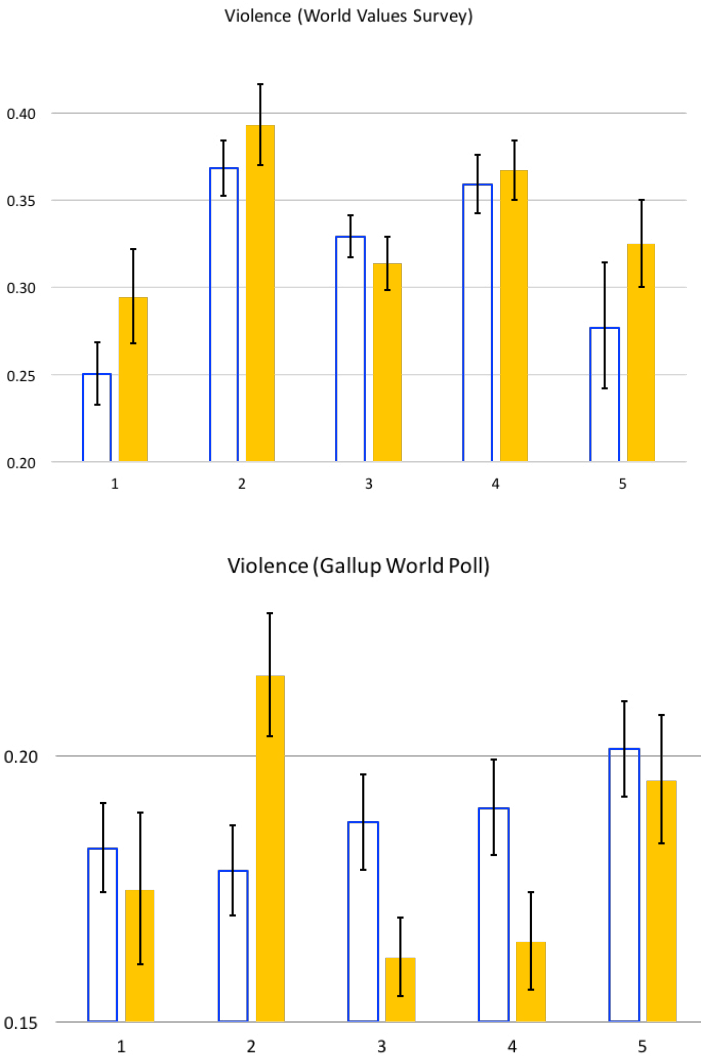
But if our findings are correct, the appeals of militias and political violence in general are also a result of vulnerabilities that are especially felt among a particular segment of the population. For this group, income, employment and consumption are highly dependent on several factors over which they have little control. Consequently, a missing component of any effort to counter militancy is a set of needed reforms to the social safety net. An updated social contract that connects the citizens to their own governments is needed to avoid exacerbating tensions between social classes and remove barriers to social mobility, while expanding the benefits afforded by markets and technological change¹³.

¹² See N. Krishnan et al. (2016); and D. Salehi-Isfahani, “Rethinking Human Development in the Middle East and North Africa: The Missing Dimensions”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2013, pp. 341-70.

¹³ See the collection of essays in “Special Issue: Social protection in the MENA

Part of this new social contract requires resisting the default preference for targeted benefits. In the past two decades, many Arab countries shifted away from broad social policies that emphasised universal benefits and toward an approach that concentrated public resources on the poorest segments of the population. Abetting this transformation in social policy has been a host of multilateral and bilateral donors that emphasised short-term cost-effectiveness over political support from broader segments of citizens in those countries. However, this new approach gradually alienated the non-poor in these countries. Crafting new social protection systems for the vulnerable class in the Arab world requires expanding the eligibility of these cohorts for social insurance.

FIG. 4.1 - SUPPORT FOR POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE ARAB WORLD



Notes: Graphs show fractions of respondents expressing support for political violence, by income and subjective well-being categories, adjusted for survey weights. Hollow bars represent income quintiles (with 1 = lowest 20% and 5 = highest 20%). Solid bars represent groupings of the Cantril life-satisfaction score, 1 = {(0), 1, 2}, 2 = {3, 4}, ..., 5 = {9, 10} on the Cantril scale (the Gallup World Poll Cantril Scale is from 0 to 10 while the World Values Survey is from 1 to 10). Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

5. Warlords and Western Policy

Daniel Byman, Israa Saber

It is often necessary for the United States and other members of the international community to work with warlords despite the many problems such efforts involve. Warlords are often the only functional actors on the ground and, as such, are necessary for building a state, delivering aid, providing services, fighting terrorist groups, and countering hostile regimes. Working with warlords, however, can interfere with stabilisation and hinder efforts to build a strong and legitimate central government. In addition, warlords regularly carry out human rights abuses, their military capacity is often limited, and there are legal barriers to cooperation. The United States and other powers should recognize the unfortunate necessity of working with warlords and improve their bureaucratic capacity to do so. In addition, they should develop warlord-specific policies, focusing on how much access to give them to aid, how to integrate them into the broader state, and which if any illicit activities to tolerate.

What Is a Warlord?

Scholar Kimberly Marten contends warlords and warlordism typically have four characteristics: first, armed men seize control over relatively small parts of territory after central authority disintegrates; these men are non-ideological, focused on their own power; they rule by charisma and patronage; and their personalistic rule fragments broader politics and economics.

Antonio Giustozzi notes that warlords are recognised by key subordinates for their military record and rely on violence to maintain power¹.

Warlords enjoy varying degrees of legitimacy. A few rule entirely by the gun, enjoying power due to fear. Some are nested within communities, drawing on tribal or other socially approved hierarchies and thus enjoying broader sanction. Still others approach a quasi-state level, having some degree of institutionalisation, foreign financial support, and other trappings of a traditional government without enjoying full diplomatic recognition. Where a warlord stands on this spectrum has profound consequences for how and when the United States and others should work with them.

Why Work with Warlords?

In many countries, warlords are often the only, or at least the most important, actors on the ground. For example, after the collapse of the Siad Barre regime and the breakout of civil war in 1991, various warlords ruled much of Somalia. Their cooperation, or at least avoiding their active opposition, was vital for Operation Restore Hope, the US-led, UN-sanctioned military effort that helped bring humanitarian aid to the country, ending the large-scale famine that had killed hundreds of thousands of Somalis. Indeed, local warlords are often the building blocks for establishing a modicum of local stability, as some groups and communities fear a strong central government would be repressive and predatory but still seek a safe environment². Following the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s, warlords effectively

¹ K. Marten, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective", *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 3, Winter 2006/2007, p. 48; A. Giustozzi, *The Debate on Warlordism: The Importance of Military Legitimacy*, Crisis States Discussion Papers no. 13, October 2005.

² K. Menkhaus, "Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping", *International Security*, vol. 31, no 3, Winter 2006/2007, p. 76.

divided the state into individual regions of control. By and large, they had popular support or at least toleration because they were able to establish some level of rule of law by setting up local judicial systems and because they were seen as an alternative to the dysfunctional and corrupt central government³.

At times the international community or local regimes will try to bring warlords into government as a way of co-opting them⁴. The Lomé Peace Agreement between the government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), a rebel group and backed by the Economic Community of West African States was one of the peace agreements that sought to bring an end to the Sierra Leonean civil war. It stipulated that the government would allow for and assist the RUF in transitioning into a political party, enable members of the RUF to hold public office, set aside certain senior and ministerial positions for RUF members, and grant Foday Sankoh, founder and leader of the RUF, the title of vice president, making him answerable only to the president⁵. The hope is that through such concessions warlords will over time integrate into a state structure and make it stronger⁶. In the case of the Lomé Agreement, however, Sankoh and the RUF almost immediately violated the terms of the ceasefire.

Indeed, after state collapse, warlords can offer an alternative form of governance. All societies need some form of law and order, and warlords provide a version of this, albeit a brutal one, functioning as a local mafia that adjudicates disputes and provides enough order for commerce and daily life to continue. Some warlords also provide social services to win popular

³ N. Dadmehr, "Tajikistan: Regionalism and Weakness", in R.I. Rotberg (ed.), *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution Press, 2003, p. 254.

⁴ International Crisis Group, "Counter-terrorism in Somalia: Losing Hearts and Minds?", *Africa Report*, no. 95, 11 July 2005.

⁵ [Peace Agreement Between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone](#), SL-RUF, S/1999/777, 18 May 1999.

⁶ A. Giustozzi (2005).

goodwill or to gain international support⁷. During Colombia's armed struggle against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a leftist guerrilla movement, the government created paramilitary groups whose leaders later became warlords. The FARC provided the populations under its control with public goods such as building roads, electrical grids, and schools. To counter the influence of the FARC, paramilitary leaders realised the need to provide their own versions of public goods such as security and some level of economic stability⁸. Often these warlords coexisted uneasily with a state government, constantly renegotiating implicit and varied power-sharing arrangements with a regime that seeks to co-opt them or subcontract out many state responsibilities all while trying to build its own relative power⁹.

Warlords have proven an important part of US counterterrorism efforts in the post-9/11 era. The United States has found warlords vital to attacking Al Qaeda and associated movements. In Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2002, the United States used warlords to "mop up" remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and as the threat persisted, the United States empowered, and sometimes even practically created, local warlords willing to hunt the Taliban and Al Qaeda¹⁰. The United States

⁷ M. Stewart, "Civil War as Statemaking", *International Organization*, vol. 72, no. 1, pp. 205-226.

⁸ D. Biró, "Warlord Governance: Transition Toward -- or Coexistence With -- the State?", in N. Raford and A. Rabulsi (eds.), *Warlord, Inc: Black Markets, Broken States, and the Rise of the Warlord Entrepreneur*, Berkely, CA, North Atlantic Books, 2015, p. 55; F. Gutiérrez Sanín and M. Barón, *Re-Stating the State: Paramilitary Territorial Control and Political Order in Colombia (1978-2004)*, Crisis States Working Paper no. 66, September 2005.

⁹ K. Menkhaus (2006/2007), p. 78; P. Staniland, "States, insurgents, and wartime political orders", *Perspectives on politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2012, pp. 243-264.

¹⁰ T. Bird and A. Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost its Way*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 251; *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtun Alienation*, International Crisis Group, Report no. 62, 5 August 2003; S. Coll, *Directorate S.: The C.I.A. and America's Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, New York, Penguin Press, 2018, p. 496.

also relied on warlords in Iraq to fight the Al Qaeda affiliate there. After the US invasion, the state was divided into small areas of control dominated by warlords. These individuals and the militias they led collaborated closely with and were funded by US forces¹¹. Warlords know the local terrain and population, and as such know the radicals within and are able to identify foreign fighters, infiltrators from neighbouring states, and others whom US or allied forces may not be able to readily identify. Although the United States and others recognised the brutality of warlords and the problems they posed for the allied state government, they were often viewed as the best option for the day-to-day of counterterrorism. One US military assessment noted that in Afghanistan, warlord forces “led every mounted patrol and most major operations”¹².

The United States previously used this strategy during counterinsurgency efforts after the Cold War. The United States government financially and militarily supported the Colombian government in creating paramilitaries intended to offset the FARC. These right-wing armed groups were eventually co-opted by the drug cartels and were responsible for a majority of deaths in the Colombian armed conflict and for egregious human rights violations¹³.

Beyond counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, states regularly work with warlords to gain influence in a country, weaken a regime or other warlords associated with an enemy, or both. Warlords, as such, are an important part of proxy warfare. Ethiopia supported warlords in Somalia, Iran did so in Afghanistan, and so did Rwanda in Congo among many examples. All sought to

¹¹ A.J. Rubin, “*In a Force for Iraqi Calm, Seeds of Conflict*”, *The New York Times*, 23 December 2007; A.R. Paley, “*Shift in Tactics Aims to Revive Struggling Insurgency*”, *The Washington Post*, 8 February 2008.

¹² S.G. Jones, “*The Rise of Afghanistan’s Insurgency*”, *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 4, Spring 2008, p 25.

¹³ “*The Military-Paramilitary Partnership and the United States*”, New York, Human Rights Watch, 1996; D. Sontag, “*The Secret History of Colombia’s Paramilitary and the U.S. War on Drugs*”, *The New York Times*, 10 September 2016.

protect key border areas and offset the influence of rival countries and groups. Often the primary goal was to weaken an enemy, not to build up a strong alternative force.

Problems with Working with Warlords

Although warlords at times play positive roles in establishing local stability, in general they impede state building either because their very local success creates less desire for a strong state among their constituents, or, more frequently, because the warlords resist a strong government, fearing a loss of wealth and power relative to the government and local rivals¹⁴. From a US point of view, this tension interferes with stabilisation missions and counter-insurgency, both of which seek to build a strong, or at least stronger, central government and enhance its legitimacy.

In addition, working with warlords also angers the central government, which fears a rival to its power. It was revealed in 2006 that the CIA was financing Somali warlords as part of a counterterrorism strategy. Though a legitimate central government did not exist in Somalia at the time, the interim president saw this as undermining efforts to strengthen the central government. The CIA's efforts backfired when Islamists overran secular warlords in Mogadishu, who were unpopular due to their corruption, and drummed up popular support using anti-US rhetoric¹⁵. If excluded from the government, however, warlords can act as spoilers, re-ignite conflict, and possibly even bring the nascent government down¹⁶.

Warlords are often corrupt and brutal or engaged in nefarious activities. Charles Taylor created a vast patronage network in Liberia that extended to Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. He

¹⁴ K. Menkhaus (2006/2007), p. 77; K. Zisk Martin, "Warlordism in Comparative Perspective", *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 3, December 2006, p. 72.

¹⁵ M. Mazzetti, "Efforts by C.I.A. Fail in Somalia, Officials Charge", *The New York Times*, 8 June 2006; "Chronology: U.S. Involvement in Somalia", *Reuters*, 21 January 2007.

¹⁶ S.J. Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes", *International Security*, vol. 22, no. 2, Fall 1997, pp. 5-53.

exploited Liberia's timber and mining industries to build up his own coffers and to develop relations with foreign companies and other warlords. For some time, he also gained control of eastern parts of Sierra Leone, which are diamond-rich and have fertile agricultural land. By essentially controlling Liberia's economy, Taylor was able to bring other militias under his control thereby expanding his political power and strengthening other warlords in the region. Sankoh, for example, was a close associate of Taylor's¹⁷. When Myanmar was a leading producer of opium, the regions where it was grown were rife with warlords. Some led small armies primarily to protect their areas of control while others led separatist movements financed by the opium trade. Some of these warlords were eventually brought into the government's fold in an effort to negotiate peace between the government and ethnic separatist groups¹⁸. Corollaries of these qualities – that warlords are buyable and tough on suspected terrorists – are part of their attraction as counterterrorism partners. For local populations, however, they often make life miserable.

Making this more complex, some of these activities benefit the local population. Warlords in West Africa, for example, use some of their profits from the drug trade and other illicit methods to pay for local social services to win over the population. In other areas, the drug trade is one of the few sources of employment and income. Similarly, while the warlord may be brutal, he is often more responsive to local political conditions than the far-away but equally corrupt and brutal central government¹⁹.

¹⁷ W. Reno, "Reinvention of an African Patrimonial State: Charles Taylor's Liberia", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 1995, pp. 109-120; W. Reno, "Persistent Insurgencies and Warlords: Who Is Nasty, Who Is Nice, and Why?," in A.K. Clunan and H.A. Trinkunas (eds.), *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2010, pp. 57-73.

¹⁸ T. Fuller, "Khun Sa, Golden Triangle Drug king, Dies at 73", *The New York Times*, 5 November 2007; H. Smith, "Olive Yang, cross-dressing warlord and Burmese opium trafficker, dies at 90", *The Washington Post*, 24 July 2017.

¹⁹ W. Reno, "Illicit markets, violence, warlords, and governance: West African

Relying on warlords-cum-government officials and the short tours for American personnel often means that the United States has a weak understanding of the multi-faceted dynamics at play, especially at the local level. In Afghanistan, many warlords used their access and power to portray the local conflicts to the United States in ways that advanced their parochial agendas²⁰. In particular, the warlords exploited the US view of the conflict to paint their rivals, competitors, and opposition as Taliban. They fingered their enemies as Taliban, leading the US to detain them or conduct military operations in “Taliban-infested” villages.

Warlords may seem necessary as counterterrorism or other partners for the short term, but their abuses make radical alternatives more attractive. The Taliban, for example, quickly gained broad support in Afghanistan after years of warlords preying on local communities, as did Islamists in Somalia who profited from popular disgust²¹. In Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban, communities suffering under the warlord-dominated order reached out to the Taliban for justice and protection. Polls indicated that local residents saw the warlords as a source of local instability, not security²². The Taliban made its initial inroads not in the places in its traditional strongholds, like Kandahar, but in places subject to the worst abuses by predatory warlords, like Helmand²³.

The military capacity of warlords is also limited. Typically they can draw on a small number of fighters from a given region. Although this local strength makes them useful for local counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions, they can be overwhelmed by more powerful forces – the Shebaab in Somalia, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Islamic State are

cases”, *Crime, law and social change*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2009, pp. 313-322.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 187-195.

²¹ K. Zisk Martin (2006), pp. 44-45.

²² S.G. Jones (2008), p. 26.

²³ M. Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978-2012*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 148-152.

only a few examples of foes that grew more powerful than local warlords and managed to overwhelm them militarily.

The United States also faces legal barriers when working with warlords. The problems can range from US complicity in warlords' human rights abuses to broader questions about uses of warlords to wage war and the risks of arms transfers being diverted and ending up in the hands of US adversaries. Article 8 of the International Law Commission's Draft Articles on State Responsibility, which are binding customary law, maintains that the conduct of a non-state actor can be attributed to a state if that non-state actor is "acting on the instructions of, or under the direction or control of, that State in carrying out the conduct"²⁴. Later, the International Court of Justice cases clarified that the state must also be in control of "each operation in which the alleged violations occurred"²⁵.

States are also subject to Common Article 1 of the Geneva Conventions, which imposes strict obligations on state support of both non-state and state actors. Common Article 1 obligates states to respect and ensure respect for the Conventions. Unlike the requirements imposed by the ILC's Draft Articles, Common Article 1 does not require that the state have effective control of its proxy or the intent to support a violating act. States, including third-party states, are also required to ensure that other states and non-state actors are complying with international law. This includes not supporting proxies if it is likely they might violate the Conventions; actual or near-certain knowledge is not required²⁶. The United States is also liable under customary international law for aiding and abetting war crimes if it understands that the support it is offering could be used to commit war crimes – intention to assist in the

²⁴ United Nations, International Law Commission, Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts art. 8, 2001.

²⁵ Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Bosn. & Herz. v. Serb. & Montenegro), Judgement, 2007 I.C.J. 921 (February 26), p. 169.

²⁶ United Nations Geneva Conventions, Common Article 1, (12 August 1949).

commission of such crimes is not required²⁷. The United States is also required, under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), to protect populations from atrocity crimes. R2P is traditionally state-centric, but non-state actors that take on traditional state roles such as providing security and social services also bear the responsibility of protecting the populations under their control²⁸.

Finally, warlords are not controllable and have different agendas than their sponsors. In Afghanistan, the empowerment of warlords exacerbated pre-existing fault lines and created new ones, as some sought to maximise largesse squeezed from the US and Afghan government while other communities, tribes, or sub-tribes sought to protect what they had. Although warlords had their own interest in targeting the Taliban to settle existing feuds or simply to collect the bounties that the United States was offering for such captures, they also had parochial priorities that had little to do with the Taliban or US objectives. Corrupt, brutal, and often illegitimate, they are willing to take bribes from multiple patrons, ignore promises made on human rights, and otherwise chart their own paths away from what their sponsors seek.

Toward a Foreign Policy Toward Warlords

Warlords are an unfortunate, but nevertheless real, part of the strategic landscape. Direct engagement by the United States and other international powers serves to depict warlords as proper political actors, which further undermines the state's

²⁷ R. Goodman, "The Law of Aiding and Abetting (Alleged) War Crimes: How to Assess US and UK Support for Saudi Strikes in Yemen", *Just Security* (blog), 1 September 2016; M.A. Drumbl, "[Extracurricular International Law](#)", *International Criminal Law Review*, vol. 16, 2016, pp. 412-447.

²⁸ UN General Assembly, Resolution 60/1, 2005 World Summit Outcome, A/RES/60/1 (October 24, 2005); R. Gerber and S.J. Rapp, "[Violent Nonstate Actors as Perpetrators and Enablers of Atrocity Crimes](#)", Warrenton, VA, The Stanley Foundation, October 2015.

central authority. So, attempts should first be made to engage with them via intermediary actors as is currently being done in Libya. This method may work on occasion, but more often than not, the United States will simply have to work with warlords, and it should improve its capacity to do so.

Better institutional capacity is a first step. In the United States, capacity for working with warlords is largely confined to intelligence community actors and special operations forces. Such actors have the legal powers and the organisational cultures to work in environments where warlords are prevalent. However, a more comprehensive policy would involve more government actors. This might include diplomats, both to help negotiate with warlords and to anticipate and minimize associated difficulties with the central government and neighbouring states. It might include Treasury Department officials versed in illicit finance and DEA officers who know the risks of narcotics smuggling. It could also include a larger role for the Justice Department to help operatives navigate the legal grey areas.

To complement increased involvement by a more diverse group of government officials, the United States needs to also improve its ability to work with local organisations that can help effectively work with warlords without empowering them to such an extent that they become unmanageable. As has been proven time and again, operations in foreign countries fail or backfire because government officials responsible for their execution do not have a deep enough understanding of local dynamics. To avoid such situations, government officials need to be more proactive in cultivating relationships with third-party individuals that can help in navigating local situations.

Cooperation with warlords also raises a host of governance issues²⁹. Warlords are often given positions in government to placate them and, ideally, to blunt their destructive tendencies.

²⁹ T. Cofman Wittes and B. Reeves, *The Fire Next Time: Findings from a Brookings-World Bank-JICA Workshop on Stabilization in the Middle East and North Africa*, Brookings, March 2018.

At the same time, this delegitimises the government as a whole and makes it harder to undertake necessary reforms. Similarly, which illicit activities should be tolerated? Warlords enrich themselves and destroy society through their linkages with narcotics trafficking, but attacking this trade can create new enemies that a weak government can ill afford³⁰.

Finally, can the United States walk away from its warlord allies or otherwise draw lines to enforce good behaviour? As the United States works with warlords, alternative allies become weaker, thus decreasing their utility. This makes the argument for turning a blind eye and carrying on stronger should the warlord prove abusive. In general, the political and bureaucratic momentum necessary to justify cooperation often makes cutting cooperation or other fine-grained manoeuvring difficult if not impossible³¹.

Drawing lines in advance of engagement is vital to ensure a broad consensus and to send credible warnings to warlords should abuses appear likely. A first step could be implementing mitigation measures to limit the possibility of human rights violations taking place. It is important to recognize that implementing such mitigation measures is actually a legal obligation under Common Article 1. The United States could also prioritize negotiating with warlords prior to engagement with them to determine an appropriate mechanism for investigating human rights and international law violations should they occur. Not only does this ensure that warlord partners recognize the US's commitment to international legal norms, but it also makes moot the eventual argument that the selected investigative mechanism is not credible or is biased.

Promoting respect for human rights often goes hand in hand with other national security priorities. Efforts to do so demonstrate to warlords hoping to gain foreign support that

³⁰ V. Felbab-Brown, *Shooting up: Counterinsurgency and the war on drugs*. Brookings Institution Press, 2009.

³¹ D.L. Byman, "Friends like these: Counterinsurgency and the war on terrorism", *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 79-115.

the decision to support them will take into consideration more than just their military prowess and that a demonstration of strength through brutality will backfire.

Conclusions

Federica Saini Fasanotti, Arturo Varvelli

In 1991, military historian Martin van Creveld wrote a book that became a milestone: *The Transformation of War*¹, in which he hypothesised the end of interstate conflicts in favour of others defined as “low intensity”. Subsequently, in February 1994, the scholar Robert Kaplan published in the magazine “The Atlantic Monthly” an article titled *The Coming Anarchy*. Starting from a description of the dramatic situation in West Africa, Kaplan stressed how local governments were incapable of guaranteeing security to their citizens, unlike in the Maghreb countries where, instead, a deep-rooted Islamic tradition had provided more stability. The analysis that emerged was ruthless: that vast slice of Africa would implode because of environmental problems, cultural and racial clashes, geographical destiny and war-related changes. This collapse would be driven by an unrestrained and necessary search for natural resources, above all water. Making a clear reference to van Creveld, he emphasised his far-sighted vision, referring to the time when van Creveld had warned institutions like the Pentagon that in these new wars they would look like dinosaurs ready for extinction. Kaplan also argued that in places far from Western civilisation, where the masses live largely below the poverty level, war is a kind of catharsis: “people find liberation in violence. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, I vicariously experienced this phenomenon: worrying about mines and ambushes frees you from

¹ M. Van Creveld, *The Trasformation of War*, New York, The Free Press, 1991.

worrying about mundane details of daily existence”². In that vision, crime and war look more and more alike. And in fact, this is what happened. In this global context, “new” entities have developed and found the perfect environment in which to proliferate: militias. They grow within the population – they are a part of it – and tend to fill the vacuum left by failed states. The phenomenon of militias as armed entities and the oxymoron they represent (guaranteeing a degree of security to the citizenry while jeopardising the stability necessary for the state to successfully govern) is catching on in Africa as well as in the Middle East, recalling in many respects pre-modern Western societies. Before the failure of Westphalian states they are, in many cases, the only alternative.

Thanks to some of the most attentive scholars on the dynamics of the MENA region, this study sought to shed light on these entities and identify key points.

Analyses of political violence tend to focus excessively on who commits the crime and not enough on “the groups of individuals who simply lend their tacit approval to militias”. Understanding the reasons behind that silent support is therefore crucial. The incubators of this phenomenon are not poorest segments of society, but rather the most vulnerable elements of the lower middle class, who often have limited access to social assistance. This lack of essential access – with the addition of the collapse of the judicial system and predatory security forces – creates frustration and scepticism: the perfect breeding ground for militias. In addition to the failure of systems of social protection in the Arab world, widespread unemployment and failed social and financial aspirations, especially among the growing class of young and educated people, contribute to this phenomenon: one of the many reasons why militiamen - and jihadi terrorists – are nearly always young men.

In this paramilitary environment, such individuals can find their reason to exist. The social group of the militia gives them

² R. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy”, *Atlantic Monthly*, no. 273, 1994.

a sense of belonging, of protection and a social status: all of which are impossible to find in a weak state apparatus. In the Libyan case, for example, the current state does not have a monopoly on force, and militias have taken its place, acting locally and creating an alternative way of governance based on a security hybrid of sorts.

Indeed, the lack of educational opportunities, unemployment, and living in areas abandoned by the state are excellent predictors of support for militias. Additionally, local populations in these areas – both criminals and law-abiding citizens – increasingly carry light and heavy weapons, since the only culture that can develop there – is that of mistrust.

A feature of militias is the figure of the so-called “warlord”, a strongman with deep local roots whose aim is to augment his own power, albeit with degrees of legitimacy. Given the position of these men – defined in this study as “part of the strategic landscape” – in the society, it is fundamental to work with them. Although they may often be criminals, they are still important actors on the ground and the “building blocks for establishing a modicum of local stability” who can offer an alternative – albeit far from perfect – form of governance. Afghanistan is a good example of that, but so are Yemen, Iraq, and Libya. These non-state actors are crucial: they gain social recognition through different forms of patronage and tribal loyalties. Given the collapse of the post-Westphalian state, tribes have become the only possible alternative and provide the only true substitute to failed governance. The security system changes, using parallel networks and becoming a sort of hybrid: in Iraq, for example, Hashd al-Sha’bi (Popular Mobilization Forces-PMF) gained significant political leverage in the years after the invasion of the so-called Islamic State, and represents a real threat to the state monopoly on force. PMF transformed into networks of powers, extending its influence in multiple spheres. In a similar manner, Hezbollah emerged to become a “superior militia” with a dual political and security strategy, which over the years has offered a valid alternative to the local administration. In

the Palestinian territories, Hamas emulated its Lebanese counterpart to emerge in Gaza as a “quasi-state actor, where it has effectively eliminated all competition and has been holding the Palestinian population there hostage for decades.

This study’s analysis of the influence of various militias in the MENA area showed that despite some enormous differences, there are points in common. The weakness of a state that can no longer to satisfy the primary needs of its citizens, but also a marked tribal nature of the social fabric. Large sections of the population in which no one has invested, especially in education, and widespread youth unemployment create the perfect conditions for militias to emerge, proliferate, and thrive until they become a valid alternative to the state. This is why they should not be ignored during the long stabilisation processes, as has been done all too often, with the case of Libya perhaps being the most striking one. Willingly or not, international policy makers will increasingly be forced to come to terms with these social entities as they flounder looking for a non-existent Westphalian counterpart. Whether it is successful or not, the international and national community must be flexible and serious in its attempts to understand such a complex phenomenon, which manifests itself through the use of control and violence but actually has deep roots in the society that produced it.

The Authors

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