

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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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 form 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 county'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.