

The Transformation of the Regional Order and Non-state Armed Actors: Pathways to the Empowerment

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This chapter will start by analyzing different dimensions of the regional transformation. Those dimensions will be elaborated in five different headings. Then, it will be argued that the undoing of the regional order has given way to a new wave of insecurities, corresponding to four sectors of security, namely state security, regime security, societal security, human security, and interstate security. These various patterns of insecurity, in turn, created different causal pathways that explain the emergence, proliferation, and empowerment of the NSAAs. This chapter will identify some of these causal pathways that produce different categories of the NSAAs, which are elaborated throughout this edited volume.

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INTRODUCTION

For the last few years, regional security environment has been shaped by the cycle of insecurity and instability underpinning the broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The tectonic structural change in the MENA has reached such a level that the region is destabilized by multi-faceted conflicts, characterized by the involvement of many local, regional, and global actors. The risks and security challenges produced by the wave of instability and conflicts have proved beyond the means and ability of the regional and international conflict resolution mechanisms to contain. As the institutions of the states-system have been unable to stabilize the regional order, violent non-state actors have grown in numbers (Mulaj 2014), expanded their capacity, and started to play decisive roles in regional security affairs.

To better contextualize the proliferation of the non-state armed actors (NSAAs), therefore, one has to look at the contours of the regional transformation. The years of turmoil have made it very obvious that the regional order was undergoing a major transformation, which is clearly reflected in the discussions on the future of the Sykes-Picot order, which arguably laid the foundations of the modern day Middle Eastern states-system in the post-Ottoman era (Yesiltas and Kardas, in this volume). As the phenomenon of NSAAs evolves within these overlapping processes of the reconfiguration of the states, the region and regional security dynamics, the chapter will start by analyzing different dimensions of the regional transformation. Below, those dimensions will be elaborated in five different headings. Then, it will be argued that the undoing of the regional order has given way to a new wave of insecurities, corresponding to four sectors of security, namely state security, regime security, societal and human security, and interstate security. These various patterns of insecurity, in turn, created different causal pathways that explain the emergence, proliferation, and empowerment of the NSAAs. This chapter will identify some of these causal pathways that produce different categories of the NSAAs, which are elaborated throughout this edited volume.

TRANSFORMATION OF THE REGIONAL ORDER

It has been widely acknowledged that the transformation in the MENA regional order has been sparked by a wave of popular uprisings, called the Arab Spring. Although the promise of democratic transformation

heralded by the initial phase of the Arab Spring generated optimism, in its second phase, the regional transformation has increasingly been viewed in pessimistic terms. The initial prognoses for democratization have given way to mixed feelings about the future direction of regional transformation. The authoritarian comeback in Egypt, an ongoing conflict in Iraq, Libya, and the Syrian civil war have all altered the regional and extra-regional attitudes toward the regional transformation, whereby the rise of new security threats shaped all actors' approach to the region. Today, the MENA region is perceived riskier than was at the outset of the Arab Spring, due to a multitude of destabilizing factors. A growing number of NSAAs have been one major manifestation of this new insecure environment, as they have contributed to the rapid erosion of the putative security in the MENA region.

Questioning of Borders

First, the existing borders in the region, recognized under international law, are increasingly questioned and challenged. Regional turmoil dealt a serious blow to the borders, marking the modern interstate system in the MENA, which emerged in the wake of the Ottoman order and then the process of decolonization. The questioning of borders is happening at least in two different directions. On the one hand, the borders are losing their function and meaning, such that in many parts of the region they have been rendered irrelevant, due to the movement of refugees, militants, arms, and other supplies across borders beyond control and regulation by legal authorities. The state authorities, from Libya to Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, can no longer exert effective control over their international borders, as they are challenged by a myriad of actors. The loss of control over crossing of people, goods, or weapons over borders or control of the same borders by actors other than the states renders the borderlines growingly meaningless.

On the other hand, the current borders recognized under international law are increasingly threatened and challenged, both in intellectual discussions and on the ground. The intractable conflicts in different countries have proved to be so resilient that the idea of "redrawing borders" is gaining momentum as a way to solve the underlying problems (Ayoob 2015). As such arguments are repeated in different quarters, there has emerged questions as to whether some of the "nation-states" can sustain their current borders in the years to come. It is in this context

that there have been calls for the dismemberment of some countries and the emergence of new states in the region. The local actors advocating such agendas have contributed to the empowerment of NSAAs.

Erosion of Sovereignty, Authority, and Governance

Second, popular upheavals led to the erosion of national authority, raising issues of legitimacy, and governance. Initially, the Arab Spring was a direct challenge to the legitimacy of extant regimes, as it was grounded in calls for good governance. Some regimes like the Gulf monarchies managed to weather the storm, either through gradual reforms or a mix of sticks and carrots. Others with weak state structures or limited resources failed to respond to the pressures and witnessed regime change. Due to the authorities' failure to stabilize the transition, the ensuing conflict cycle continues to plague their ability to govern. Governing at a time of tectonic regional transformation is proving impossible at worst and very difficult and costly at best. Today, although various countries have experienced the regional transformation in their unique ways, they all face problems of governance and are challenged by the erosion of state sovereignty.

The erosion of sovereignty and state authority further puts pressure on the nation-states, hence, the states-system in the Middle East. The national authorities, which continue to possess legal sovereignty under international law and represent their countries in international institutions, are no longer able to govern the entirety of their territories. There are competing centers of power that have established effective controls over large parts of several states, sometimes crosscutting existing state boundaries. As a result, either in the form of redesign of the existing administrative structures through federalism or in the form of dismemberment of the states, the future shape of the Middle Eastern political map remains uncertain (Kardaş 2016). In any case, in this environment, the region is full of failed or failing states, which are creating large areas that are ungoverned or outside the boundaries of legality. Such ungoverned spaces created a fertile ground for various terrorist groups, insurgents, or criminal networks to act outside of legality and international jurisdiction. Particularly, the new wave of militant extremist groups capitalized on the weak state structures and ungoverned spaces to expand their operations and use such areas as safe heavens (Hazbun 2015). Consequently, the region has been suffering from various security threats that have flourished in this chaotic environment.

Empowerment of Sub-national Actors and Identities

Third, sub-national actors and identities are empowered during the process of regional restructuring, largely at the expense of the “nation-state” model. On the one hand, the political mobilization around ethnic, sectarian, tribal, or local-regional loyalties is undermining the achievements of the controversial nation-state model in the region. At the same time, the empowerment of sub-national actors and identities has highlighted the mismatch between borders and societies. The so-called Sykes-Picot order, which laid the foundations of the modern interstate system in the post-Ottoman Middle East, was partly characterized by the artificiality of the borders (Sayyid 2014). The new states were far from homogenous while their societies were made up by numerous ethnic, religious, sectarian, or linguistic groups. During the colonial and post-colonial era, the governance models adopted in the regional countries have failed to manage the ethnic and sectarian diversity and mold them into a national identity. Although the nation-state model was never perfect in this part of the world, nonetheless, it achieved some semblance of national identity throughout the twentieth century. Now, the empowerment of sub-state identities and actors is threatening the putative national identity and risking fragmentation along ethnic, religious-sectarian, or local-regional identities.

On the other hand, various actors ranging from criminal networks to militant groups are expanding their resources and capabilities. As they are engaged in different forms of violence and criminality, they also work to weaken the public authority, hence the sovereign nation-state model (Williams 2008). The main challenge before the region in the years to come will be to address the demands of the various sub-state actors within an inclusive and participatory framework. If the regional countries fail to manage this highly mobilized bottom-up wave, the nation-state model is likely to encounter further destructive challenges coming from those sub-state actors adopting violence as their method of political expression.

Structural Instability

Fourth, there is a vicious circle between the economic and social underdevelopment on the one hand, and political underdevelopment on the other, which is producing structural instability in the MENA region. The

worsening socioeconomic conditions are feeding the political underdevelopment, while the poor political institutions are weakening the prospects for socioeconomic progress. The consequence of this vicious cycle is that the specter of state collapse is on the rise in this new environment, as was experienced in different countries. The descent into conflict, let alone meeting some of these demands for reform within a reasonable framework, in the last couple of years has brought several states on the verge of state collapse or undermined their ability to govern. The lack of a stable framework for and inability to govern the political transition has once again securitized the political demands in the region.

It is in this context important to remember that the regional transformation process was triggered by the Arab Spring. It was a genuine call for socioeconomic and political reform, with Arab people demanding bottom-up transformation. Although that process was interrupted by the spread of conflict in the region, what prompted the masses to go on to the streets at the beginning of the Arab Spring remains ever more relevant today. The underlying social, economic, and political grievances are still there, with no realistic prospect of resolving them any time soon. As a result, the region is characterized by deep structural instability, which will be aggravated by the demographic trends and other socioeconomic indicators. This observation suggests that if the regional actors and international community fail to assist the socioeconomic reforms and transition toward representative political structures, the region is likely to encounter new waves of destabilizing uprisings.

Lack of Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

Fifth, the lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms in the region worsens the manifold problems already outlined. The above-mentioned processes have presented such deep socioeconomic and political challenges that they have produced an ever-widening security gap in the MENA region. When a region goes through such a deep wave of instability, the most needed instrument is a collective security mechanism to deescalate tensions and pacify conflicts. The MENA region lagged far behind other parts of the world in terms of developing regional conflict mechanisms. This has been demonstrated once again at this critical juncture: The regional actors failed to develop a regional solution to the crises ranging from Libya to Syria, relying instead on international powers. The weakness of regional or international conflict resolution mechanisms, in turn, has aggravated political problems (Kardas 2016).

The old mechanism of external security provision by the international actors, which used to suppress violence, however questionable it might have been, has proved increasingly ineffective in this current cycle of violence. On the one hand, the new course of American foreign policy, where the incumbent US administration preferred to lessen commitments in the Middle East, has undercut its constructive peace broker role in the regional disputes. The declining US security provision on the one hand and the changing regional geopolitics in the wake of the Iranian nuclear deal have triggered security competition among major regional actors. On the other hand, the involvement of Russia to expand its influence in the region escalated the tensions and increased the potential for further conflicts. The lack of regional mechanisms has been revealed more blatantly with the deepening conflict spirals in Syria, Iraq, or Libya, where local, regional, and global rivalries have led to various forms of direct conflicts and proxy wars throughout the region (Durac 2015). As the regional rivalries have been further aggravated, fueled by the destabilizing involvement of global actors, the security environment in the region has been further deteriorated.

WAVE OF REGIONAL INSECURITIES: PATHWAYS TO NSAAs

The new wave of regional insecurities has bred a conducive environment within which NSAAs have flourished and been empowered. Definitely, one critical variable explaining the emergence and success of NSAAs is the ability of a particular group to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the new regional environment. There are, however, various ways and causal mechanisms within which the proliferation of these groups is happening (Yeşiltaş and Kardaş, in this volume). While the empowerment of NSAAs is taking place in a radically altered regional environment, they are also supported directly and indirectly by actors ranging from their respective states to regional powers and international actors. Based on the foregoing discussion, below, four causal mechanisms will be explicated, each corresponding to a different sector of (in)security (Table 2.1).

State (in)Security

As has been discussed, as a result of the erosion of sovereignty and governance, national authorities are hardly able to exert full control over the entirety of their countries. At the same time, the spread of arms or militants across state borders continues to destabilize regional countries

Table 2.1 Pathways to the empowerment of NSAAs

<i>Security sector</i>	<i>Main dynamics</i>	<i>Type of NSAAs empowered</i>
State (in)security	Weakening state power	Anti-government Loyalists
Regime (in)security	Regimes' survival strategies	Loyalists Extremists
Interstate (in)security	Security competition and proxy wars	All forms
Societal and human (in)security	Kurdish and Shiite mobilization and Sunni marginalization	Sectarian Ethnic

(Dal 2016). The weakening of state capacity and the physical limits to state power have reached such levels that many regional states can no longer manage security issues and establish public order over their territory.

Subsequently, NSAAs emerge as contending centers of authority, further aggravating the problem of sovereignty and governance. Indeed, the most typical causal pathway is generated by the weakening of state authority and power. As several countries have come to the verge of failed or failing state, NSAAs emerged in the governance vacuum. In this new environment, various non-state actors now are in control of major segments of territory, resources, and population and in some cases are claiming sovereign jurisdiction over parts of regional countries and cross-border areas (Vinci 2008). In particular, the weak states and ungoverned or non-governable spaces have been utilized by the militant extremist groups to expand their clout, in which they are seeking to substitute state functions, most notably security provision.

The emergence and spread of multiple militant non-state actors in Syria is the case in point. When the Syrian uprising began, the security forces encountered difficulties in maintaining effective physical control in all parts of the country. Later, coupled with the rapid pace of defections from the regular armed forces, several armed groups emerged throughout the country (Lister 2015). Consequently, particularly the border provinces of the country fell to the control of such militant groups. Over time, more radical and extremist elements within the Syrian opposition emerged to fill the vacuum. In most cases, they gained territory from the moderate opposition forces, as was reflected in the expansion of the ISIS in northern Syria through 2013. At the same time, the PYD also took

advantage of the weakening state power to establish its own cantonal structure along northern Syria (Acun 2015; Orhan 2016).

As the Syrian regime accommodated to this new reality and developed a symbiotic relationship with some of these groups, it also facilitated the widening specter of non-state actors. In cases where the Syrian regime tried to mobilize resources to encounter that challenge, the physical limits to the state power prevented it from accomplishing that objective. In several instances, for example, the Syrian Arab Army failed in its drive to recruit new soldiers, as it sought to compensate for the losses in manpower or regain control over the areas ceded to various opposition forces. The rapid disintegration of the Syrian state's security apparatus, which led many to expect a total defeat, was stopped only by the infusion of external military elements on the side of the Syrian Arab Army and its local militia allies. The Syrian security forces still remain unable to hold the territory captured from the opposition forces, despite the enormous military assistance provided by the Iranian and Russian air and ground components as well as other foreign militias. The prospects for the Syrian security forces to reestablish the government authority in the entirety of the country are bleak, which point to the durability of the NSAAs for some time to come.

In Iraq, as well, the weakness in state capacity and authority since the first Gulf War has enabled the emergence of various non-state actors contending the central government's authority. The inability of Baghdad to reign over the Kurdistan region forced it to accommodate to the Kurdish self-governance, which was formalized through a federal structure in the wake of the US invasion in 2003. The collapse of the central authority after 2003 gave birth to several NSAAs, many of which were formed to resist the US occupation. Although most attention focused on the Sunni insurgency and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, the spread of various Shiite armed groups also benefited from the authority vacuum. Over time, the Sunni insurgency was quelled and the various Shiite militia formations were eliminated until the rise of ISIS in Iraq in June 2014 (Duman 2015). With the rapid disintegration of the state military apparatus, however, many of those NSAA actors returned back to the Iraqi scene to fill the same governance and security vacuum. Although the rebuilding of the Iraqi national capacity was a key component of the anti-ISIS coalition's strategy, the new Iraqi state has hardly been able to eliminate the threat completely.

Regime (in)Security

As the popular movements threatened the existing political orders, the incumbent regimes in the authoritarian states have been increasingly occupied by their quest for survival. Both the initial Arab Spring spirit of democratic transformation and the subsequent risk-prone regional environment pose threats to the legitimacy and survival of several regimes in the region. In the process, the rising prominence of regime security concerns has turned many countries into virtual states. The state structures have been extremely weakened, such that even many of their functions pertaining to security provision have been assumed by NSAAs, as a result of which the sovereignty of the regional states has turned into virtual reality. In particular, various survival strategies pursued by the regimes feeling threatened by the wave of political transition have facilitated the emergence and spread of NSAAs. Among others, three strategies created unique pathways through which different NSAAs emerged: abandonment of areas deemed difficult or unworthy to govern, empowerment of loyalist militias, and dividing the opposition by facilitating the emergence of new groups.

The transformation of the Syrian theater provides the best example of these growing number of virtual states in the region, where the regimes' prime concern for their own survival has led to the emergence of different violent actors. First, from the very beginning of the Syrian uprising, the Assad regime abandoned vast areas of the country, so that it could concentrate on the densely populated urban centers, the capital, and the coastal areas. As the defections and the cost of holding the entire territory increased, the regime chose to embolden its security and governance apparatus as well as to protect its own social base. As it consolidated the so-called useful Syria, the opposition forces gained control in the country's borders to Turkey, Jordan, and Syria. These areas also allowed for the penetration of various militant Salafi groups, as the Syrian revolution was hijacked by radical extremist ideologies and actors (Lister 2015). Second, in order to divide the moderate opposition and delegitimize it internationally, the regime has facilitated the extremist elements' gaining more prominence. It has been well documented how the Syrian regime released many known extremist militants in the early stages of the uprising, which later provided the nucleus of the Al-Qaeda and ISIS in the country. The deep ties the Syrian intelligence services established with the Salafi militant networks in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq allowed the regime to manipulate the course of the Syrian crisis.

Lastly, the regime's empowerment of various loyalist militia forces, partly because of its eroding power and partly because of a policy of implicit burden-sharing has further proliferated the NSAAs. Most attention has been focused on the myriad armed groups making up the "Syrian opposition," as well as the foreign fighters flooding into the country to support various militant groups. Analysts and policy makers have pinpointed the fragmentation of the opposition as one of the major security challenges in the region. Nonetheless, it is often overlooked how the security apparatus that the Syrian regime has relied on was hardly unitary. In addition to drawing on the support of its external backers, namely Russia and Iran, the Assad regime's survival strategy came to hinge on foreign and domestic militia formations, which are textbook examples of NSAAs. As the sustenance of the regime became the ultima ratio of the government in Damascus, it has expressed no jealousy in sharing its monopoly over the use of force with various domestic and regional non-state actors. On the one hand, the foreign militia groups from other countries, facilitated largely by Iran, have come to the aid of the regime (The Soufan Group 2015). On the other hand, various loyalist militia formations have flourished throughout the country, which were supported, endorsed, or facilitated by the regime. Limitations and weakness in the state security apparatus could only be compensated for by the mobilization of militia forces, which proved essential for the regime's survival strategy.

In many instances throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, militias fighting on the regime side have emerged as the lead actors to shape the fate of the conflict, thus becoming the main arbiter of the regime survival. On many fronts, the ground elements making up the fighting force for the Assad regime have been drawn from regular army units, National Defense Force (NDF), various loyalist militia, as well as sectarian militia groups from Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and beyond. While military units from Iran and Russia under different guises complemented that picture, the domestic militia forces provided an important source of manpower in Assad's military arsenal. For instance, one of the loyalist militia forces, Qalamoun Shield, was utilized by the regime on several critical fronts. Initially, it emerged in the countryside of Damascus to fight the opposition groups alongside the border with Lebanon. The regime also encouraged participation of loyalist citizens into this militia group, as well as others. The regime issued pardons for the youth who fled conscription and military service, should they join such militia

forces. When the regime confronted shortages in its military operations in Northern Hama, this force was called to support the regime advances in the province. Later, after the fall of Palmyra to ISIS for a second time in December 2016, the reinforcement units from this loyalist militia were dispatched to the battlefield to support the regime forces.

Regime security concerns have also played a large role in the destabilization of Iraq, hence the spread of the NSAA's. The new governance structure in the post-2003 Iraq was rested on a power-sharing model along sectarian and ethnic lines. Over time, however, the dominance of the Shiite political actors led to the marginalization of other groups, which raised the societal security concerns of particularly the Sunni Arabs. The intra-Shiite political dynamics of the post-American invasion Iraq have generated an equally destabilizing dynamic. The competition among the Shiite groups and Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki's attempts to monopolize power and build a new regime centered around his group shaped the Iraqi political scene, especially after the withdrawal of American forces by 2011 (Duman and Sönmez, in this volume). With the onset of the Arab Spring, Maliki's efforts to embolden his rule shook the delicate power-sharing arrangements even further. A new Sunni insurgency was already in the making by the end of 2013. There were arguments that he deliberately overlooked, if not allowed, the growing influence of ISIS, so that it could pursue heavy-handed repressive policies to bring the Sunni political leadership onto its knees (Weiss and Hassan 2015). When ISIS took control of Mosul in a swift move in June 2014, the entire political dynamics changed. At a time the regular Iraqi Army was in a state of panic, the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) rose to prominence as the lead security force to stop the ISIS advance. The rapid mobilization of the PMU owed partly to the intra-elite dynamics among the Shiite groups. As part of the intra-Shiite political struggle, especially Maliki, who lost his bid for premiership for a third term by the summer of 2014, and his entourage empowered the PMU.

Interstate (in)Security

As has been outlined, the onset of the Arab Spring underscored a deep tectonic transformation in the regional security order. No actor's efforts alone were enough to assist the political transformation agenda, and diverging positions pursued by different international actors resulted in the stalling of political reforms. Increasingly, the region has been drawn

into a cycle of violence as observed in Libya, Syria, or Iraq, creating myriad security challenges that are threatening the regional order, as well as producing security externalities, for the international system at large.

When regional actors failed to develop effective instruments to prevent, mitigate, or stabilize either political disputes or military conflicts, the region's characteristic as a sub-system that is prone to the international penetration came to the forefront. From their very beginning, the crises in the region have been internationalized. The involvement of extra-regional actors, however, has been far from constructive, reflecting either the poor state of international conflict resolution mechanisms or the clash of interests shaping international reactions. The declining commitment of the international community and the policy of containment and relative disengagement deepened the vacuum of regional security governance.

Consequently, the MENA region has seen a deep cycle of insecurity, in which security competition has been the norm, dealing a serious blow to the interstate security. While the MENA region was going through radicalization, militarization, and fragmentation, in this new regional environment, initiating cooperative projects has proven difficult. Through the contagious effect, regional countries have been exposed to the security risks stemming from the conflicts. The rising tide of sectarianism, the threats posed by ISIS, the militarization of politics, and spread of ethnic terrorism have been the specific challenges that put enormous pressure on the regional actors. Similarly, there has been major potential for conflict spillover in the region, as a result of the weakening of regional order and the lack of commitment from the international actors to quell violence. The spread of the conflict from Syria to Iraq is a clear attestation of the contagious spillover effect. At the same time, polarization between the regional actors along strategic or identity-based fault lines put further stress on the interstate security. Indeed, the civil wars unfolding in Iraq and Syria had multi-faceted characteristics. In addition to being rooted in the local grievances, they have turned into a stage for the regional rivalries. The deepening polarization among regional actors, thus, came to be reflected on the battlefields.

In this highly competitive and risky security environment, regional actors have been mired in proxy wars, bordering direct confrontation. Likewise, international actors, too, were part of the same (in)security dynamics. While security competition produced proxy wars of various sorts, proxy wars, in turn, empowered a wide range of non-state actors.

For several reasons, the regional actors, as well as the international players, preferred to realize their objectives through proxies, which eventually unleashed the NSAAs throughout the region. First, the conventional thinking suggests that high costs of interstate warfare breed irregular methods, hence proxy wars. Given the risk of direct entanglement at a time of deep regional polarization, which might have proved very destructive for all parties concerned, the employment of proxies has been a less risky option. Particularly, the rift between Saudi Arabia and Iran has been the main dynamic to empower local proxies. Second, the evolution of the concept of hybrid warfare has also forced international powers to work through irregular elements on the field rather than deploying ground components. In that respect, both the USA and Russia, for their own reasons, empowered various non-state actors in the conflict zones, whereby their modern war machinery worked in support of those proxies on the ground. Third, relying on proxies has been seen a less costly option for the intervening country, in terms of both blood and treasure, than direct military engagement in the protracted civil wars. Fourth, the patrons have also found it useful to support multiple proxies as a way of disciplining their clients, which led to the multiplication of the NSAAs. Even in cases where the government in the target country was a client, regional, and international, actors still worked with different non-state armed elements.

In Syria, one can trace the evolution of those proxy dynamics very clearly. The ability of the anti-Assad opposition forces to draw support from different regional actors, particularly from Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, has been a major factor facilitating their emergence, spread, and empowerment. In the initial phase of the Syrian uprising, even funding channeled from private sources, through charities, has been instrumental in financing various groups on the battlefield. Over time, the vetted opposition groups, loosely coming under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, also received financial and military assistance from Western actors and Turkey through the different train and equip programs, which resulted in the further fragmentation of opposition, and accompanying the growth in the number of NSAAs. The availability of weapons flows to the conflict environment has directly and indirectly facilitated the expansion of different brands of NSAAs. At the same time, the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, to a large part supported by the proxy war dynamics, further proliferated the NSAAs in the conflict. Some of those groups either evolved into more radical line or through the shifting dynamics of conflict, the assistance from international backers landed

in the hands of more extremist groups. Later, the dissatisfaction of the USA with the FSA-affiliated groups led it to tilt toward PYD/YPG. The US supply of various types of advanced military equipment, including anti-tank missiles, as well as close combat air support, empowered the PYD/YPG at the expense of others. In an illustrative example of working with various rival proxies, there was constant reporting that while the Pentagon backed the PYD/YPG, the CIA continued to support the FSA through the train and equip programs, at the risk of the two groups fighting each other occasionally (Öğür and Baykal, in this volume).

On the Syrian battle field, the very obvious proxy dynamics have also been illustrated by the pro-regime, mostly sectarian Shiite, militia formations. Given the place Syria occupied in its regional policies, Iran has been the main supporter of the Syrian regime. While a long proxy of Iran in the regional affairs, the Syrian regime's survival was ensured by the lifeline extended by Iran. In order to counter the Western and Saudi policies, Iran marshaled huge resources to rescue its proxy and ally. The manner in which Iran channeled this assistance, however, contributed to the proliferation of NSAA's even further. In addition to the direct economic and military assistance to the regime, Iran also created, assisted, or supervised several loyalist militia formations, ranging from Shabiha forces to the NDF, involving predominantly Shiite but also Druze, Christian, and other communities. Moreover, Iran also mobilized its other Shiite proxies into the Syrian battlefield, which extended a very decisive support to the Syrian regime. Especially, the deployment of the Lebanese Hezbollah, which not only provided a fighting force but also offered training to the local Syrian and other foreign Shia militia, was instrumental in preventing the fall of the Assad regime. Similarly, the transfer of various Hashd Shaabi groups from Iraq to Syria, as well as Iran's orchestration of the recruitment, training, and transfer of sectarian fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries with Shiite minority played a key role in the Syrian conflict. As such, the emergence and spread of various Shiite militia forces from other countries in Syria was a stark reminder of the contagious effect of the proxy war dynamics (Duman 2015).

Similarly, the conflict in Iraq has seen a rapid proliferation of the sectarian militia formations, through proxy dynamics. Iran has for long supported various underground opposition movements in Iraq, dating back to the Saddam era. With the collapse of the Baathist rule in the wake of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Shiite political-religious

groups immediately moved to form their armed elements, which was seen as essential in the chaotic civil war environment during the US occupation. These groups received covert support from Iran, which feared a US intervention at the time. Although some of these groups were brought under the control of the Iraqi central government, with the advance of ISIS in 2014, the Shiite militia formations came to the agenda once again. Definitely, some of these groups were products of the local dynamics and are Iraqi in character, but many of them benefited from Iranian assistance in the form of military aid or training. This time, Iran was in the position of extending its assistance to these groups in a more open fashion, since a friendly government was ruling Baghdad and over time they also received legal recognition in the Iraqi military apparatus. In any case, many of these groups have been instrumental to Iran's political objectives in Iraq and the region; hence, Iran actively supported these groups.

Societal and Human (in)Security

In an altered security environment where the state authority and national identity have weakened and sub-state identities emboldened, the societal security concerns have been heightened. Ethnic, tribal, local, or sectarian grievances increasingly emerged as markers of the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and other countries to overshadow the initial democratic character of the regional transformation. As the sub-national identities became politicized and served as tools for political and military mobilization, the nation-states have confronted with a formidable challenge. Especially considering the cross-border nature of the dominant sub-state identities, both the territorial integrity and societal security of the nation-states have been threatened. The rising specter of violent extremism, which is intermingled with the politicization of sub-national identities, has a devastating impact on many of the societies, undermining the multicultural fabric.

Parallel to societal security, human security has gone through degradation as well. With the collapse of the public order, myriad threats to individuals emerged in regional countries. The violent extremism took a heavy toll on the civilian lives. In this environment, not only non-state actors, but also the regime or government operatives have been the main perpetrators of killings and crimes against the individuals. The deterioration of human security has taken also indirect forms. For instance, the

refugees and internally displaced people have experienced extreme misery. Basic humanitarian needs have been difficult to reach, while the civilian infrastructure has been damaged by the conflicts. Overall, human development indicators have been worsened throughout the region. In this environment of eroding human security and disintegrating social fabric, the marginalization and atomization of individuals created a vast pool from which NSAAs could draw recruits and resources.

The declining societal security contributed to the rise of NSAAs in various ways. As the specter of identity politics deepened, two particular reactions are worth mentioning: First, some groups have capitalized on the new opportunity spaces and asserted their identity in the regional politics. For instance, the erosion of borders and state authority raised the expectations of the Kurdish actors to alter the status quo to their advantage, as was reflected in the discussions on the revision of Sykes-Picot order. The growing salience of the Kurds on the regional level has forced the existing states to reconsider their policies toward the Kurdish demands. Similarly, the increased assertiveness of the Shia groups in different countries and their utilization of sectarian identity as a tool of political mobilization have helped them expand their influence, though this process escalated the sectarian tensions (Orhan 2015).

The second dimension of identity politics-related mobilization concerns the groups feeling threatened. While some identities have been empowered, members of other identities have been politically marginalized. In particular, the Sunni marginalization and disenfranchisement throughout the region have emerged as a major source of violent extremism. The lack or collapse of a Sunni political leadership and the perceptions of an expansionist Shiite are raised fears among many Sunni communities from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. Those marginalized groups in many cases sought representation and protection by various non-state actors, and in some cases the NSAAs. The ability of the extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS to capitalize on the Sunni marginalization has been one major factor, facilitating their emergence, expansion, and durability.

CONCLUSION

As the regional order in MENA goes through restructuring, various forces including but not limited to sectarianism, ethnic mobilization, social fragmentation, the militarization of politics, and so on are breeding polarization among regional actors. The international actors have

been mired in the very same patterns of insecurity. What is needed today is a new framework for security governance in the Middle East that will help mitigate conflicts and a new political understanding structured around reform and institution building to heal fragile state structures. Both of them are lacking, and the prevailing trends are working in an opposite direction. In this environment, NSAA actors have emerged as key players, affecting the course of regional security affairs.

While some of the NSAAs are products of the vacuum created by the conjecture, there are indicators that several of them may have gained durable quality. Here, the example of the Lebanese Hezbollah may be one path that will be taken by these groups. Emerged in the context of the Lebanese civil war and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the country, the Hezbollah managed to maintain its existence and retain the military power in the shaky structure of Lebanon. Some of the NSAAs may replicate the same model in their respective countries. Another path is presented by the IRGC experiment as a secondary security establishment, which is very unique. Hashd Shaabi elements in Iraq or the NDF in Syria may eventually come close to this model.

As they have assumed critical roles, NSAAs have increasingly moved beyond being mere proxies and have occasionally acted on their own agendas. Emboldened in this new environment, they have come to claim regional actorhood, the case in point being the Lebanese Hezbollah, which is now operating in several other countries. It remains to be seen how they will transform the notions of statehood, region, and order in the Middle East, once the current phase of conflict comes to an end.

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