

The Role of Non-State Actors in Arab Countries after the Arab Uprisings

Vincent Durac

School of Politics and International Relations
University College Dublin

The years since the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 have witnessed what appears to be an extraordinary proliferation of non-state actors in the Middle East, matched by the consequent increase in their significance for political dynamics across the region. The category of non-state actors embraces a diversity of organisations and movements. It comprehends civil society and the flourishing non-governmental sector that has assumed great importance in the Arab world since the end of the Cold War. It includes an array of Islamist actors, including mainstream organisations, such as Al-Nahda in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Party of Justice and Development in Morocco as well as Salafi groups which have emerged across the region from Tunisia to Yemen. It also includes violent Islamist movements, such as Ansar Bayt Maqdis which has been active in the Sinai region of Egypt, al-Murabitoun, the group led by Algerian Islamist, Mokhtar Belmokhtar, which attacked an Algerian gas installation in January 2013, leading to the deaths of 38 hostages, an array of militias that emerged in Libya following the fall of Gaddafi, and in Syria, after the outbreak of the uprising in that country, as well as the Shai Zaydi 'Houthi' movement which took control of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa in late 2014 plunging that country into conflict. Undoubtedly, the greatest focus of international attention in the last year has been the movement variously known as 'Islamic State,' ISIS and ISIL. This brief survey by no means exhausts the category of non-state actors in the Middle East. However, it does illustrate the sheer diversity that

the term embraces, which, in turn, raises the question of how precisely the concept of non-state actor is to be understood.

Non-State Actors: a Definition

Posing that question is significantly easier than answering it. Josselin and Wallace (2001) propose that the concept of non-state actors should include organisations that are largely or entirely autonomous from central government funding and control, and emanate from civil society or the market economy or from 'political impulses' beyond the control of the State. It also includes organisations that operate as, or participate in networks that extend the boundaries of two or more states, thus engaging in transnational relations, linking political systems, economies and societies. Finally, it includes organisations that seek to affect political outcomes either within one or more states or within international institutions. Arat (2006) offers an indicative list of the sorts of organisations that may constitute non-state actors. This includes: organised opposition to government, some of which may be engaged in armed struggle; private enterprises engaged in trade, finance, manufacturing and service provision; professional, business and labour organisations; aid and development organisations; the media; religious institutions and organisations; people's tribunals; and less formal groups such as families, ad hoc and spontaneous groups, religious, ethnic and neighbourhood communities, street gangs and underground organisations such as the mafia, mercenaries and militia groups. This clearly is a capacious list and points to a central difficulty with the concept of non-state actor, insofar as it is defined in terms of what it is not – the State – rather than what it is.

Non-State Actors in the Middle East

However the concept is understood, it is a truism that, since 2011, non-state actors have assumed increasing significance in social and political life across the Middle East. Indeed, they played a crucial role in movements that brought about the demise of autocratic governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. In Tunisia, the uprising against the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was initiated by youth protesters. However, it gained traction when the anti-regime movement was bolstered by the support of the trade union federation, the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union), the Bar Association, legal as well as illegal political parties and, finally, the Islamists of Al-Nahda – the Islamic movement that had been banned by the old regime. In Egypt, the early days of the protest movement were driven by young people mobilising online, in particular, the April 6 Movement and the supporters of the ‘We are all Khaled Said’ Facebook page. But, it was when the independent youth movements were joined by non-state actors, in the form of labour activists, and the youth wings of political parties of all ideological orientations, secular as well as Islamist, that the demise of the Mubarak regime became inevitable. In Libya, the February 17 anti-Gaddafi movement was quickly joined by business interests, tribal groups, Islamists and others. This cross-ideological coalition, together with the intervention of external actors in support of the anti-regime rebels spelled the end of the Gaddafi era in Libyan political life. Similarly, the fall of the Saleh regime in Yemen became inevitable, at least in part, when the coalition of youth organisations that initiated anti-regime protests was joined by a diverse array of political parties as well as non-state actors in both the north and the south of the country, seeking greater autonomy (if not independence) from the regime in Sanaa. The period since the uprisings has seen a large increase in the numbers of civil society organisations. According to one estimate, 5,000 new civil society organisations have been established in Tunisia in the past four years while 3,000 new organisations emerged in Libya after the fall of Gaddafi.

Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East

Within the broader category of non-state actors, the emergence of a range of armed groups across the

Middle East has attracted great concern and international attention. The phenomenon of violent non-state actors is global in scope and by no means limited to the Middle East. Armed actors that are not formally linked to the State threaten security in different settings around the world. As with non-state actors, the category of violent non-state actor is also broad. Violent challengers to the State’s monopoly on the use of force can take many different forms, including tribal and ethnic groups, warlords, drug traffickers, youth gangs, terrorists, militias, insurgents and transnational terrorist organisations. Nor are their concerns always primarily political or directed towards the state level. Many are motivated less by ideology than by profit-seeking, while others are driven by local concerns. Examples include armed drug lords in Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and elsewhere, international smuggling rings, mafia-type organisations, community-based vigilantes and private security forces that have emerged in both politically stable and unstable countries. In the Arab world, the social and political conditions which followed the uprisings of 2011 have provided the setting for the emergence of an array of armed non-state actors in several states.

Libya

The fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya saw the emergence of a host of armed militias. Initial estimates of their numbers varied from 100 to 300 such groups with some 125,000 individuals under arms. By 2014, it was believed that up to 1,600 militia groups existed. These are regionally based and comprise Islamist and non-Islamist actors. The most significant are in Zintan, Tripoli, Misrata and Benghazi. Since 2012, militias or coalitions of militias have become increasingly politicised through affiliations with the major political parties in the country. These affiliations draw on kinship, regional, tribal, as well as religious and ideological linkages. A significant number of armed groups have been incorporated into two larger coalitions – the Libya Shield Force and the Supreme Security Committee, both of which were established as transitional security forces under the authority of the Ministry of Defence and Ministry of the Interior respectively. However, the militias retain a high degree of autonomy and pursue their own agendas. They range from ideological and po-

litical to local, individualistic and sometimes criminal. The situation is exacerbated by the weakness of the national army which was deliberately neglected under the old regime. The militias have also been drawn into the ongoing conflict in Libya between the Islamist-dominated General National Congress based in Tripoli and the House of Representatives based in Tobruk, each of which in turn draw on regional and international support.

Yemen

In Yemen, for much of the past fifteen years, international attention focused on the violent Sunni radicals of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Qaeda first attracted the concern of international observers when it launched an attack on the USS Cole in Aden harbour in 2000, killing 17 US servicemen. Many believe that former President Saleh stoked the jihadist threat in order to secure military and financial support from the US – he was widely suspected of complicity in the escape from prison in 2006 of a number of convicted terrorists. In 2012, a group linked with AQAP took advantage of the security vacuum that followed the fall of the Saleh regime to expand the territory under its control in the Abyan and Shabwa provinces.

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More recently, attention has shifted from AQAP to another Yemeni non-state actor, the Houthi movement, a Shia Zaydi group which over a six month period advanced from its stronghold in the north of the country to seize control of the capital Sanaa in September 2014. This prompted a Saudi-led intervention which had as its objective the restoration of political settlement put in place by the Gulf Cooperation Council when former President Ali Abdullah Saleh finally resigned his office in November 2011.

In the intervening period, at least 2,600 people have lost their lives while, according to UN estimates, at least six million Yemenis are slipping into severe hunger.

The Houthi movement began in the Saada province in 2004 when anti-government demonstrations and disturbances by members of a group known as the Zaydi Believing Youth (*Shabab al-Mumin*) movement spread to Sanaa with protesters criticising the regime for its cooperation with the United States in counterterrorism. When the government tried to arrest the leader of the movement, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi, fighting broke out. Since 2004, there have been six bouts of fighting with the loss of several thousand lives (including that of al-Houthi) and very significant internal displacement of the population. Despite several ceasefires – the most recent was reached in February 2010 – the government did little to address the underlying causes of the violence which were then transformed from locally driven concerns of marginalisation and economic underdevelopment to widespread anger and dissatisfaction with the regime.

Iraq

ISIS first came to attention in December of 2013 when it seized control of Fallujah and Ramadi, two major cities in the Anbar province of Iraq in the west of the country. Nearly all of Anbar's population is Sunni Muslim in a country whose government has been dominated by representatives of its Shia majority since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as it was then known, had its origins in Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which in turn was a direct response to the US invasion. AQI had its stronghold in Anbar but by 2008 had alienated many because of its extreme violence. The resulting backlash and the US-supported 'surge' largely eliminated the influence of AQI. However, under the leadership of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group entered the conflict in neighbouring Syria, where it established a presence in several Syrian governorates. In April of 2013, the group became the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Finally, having extended its control over a substantial area straddling Syria and Iraq, the group declared a global Islamic caliphate and renamed itself the 'Islamic State' (it is still commonly referred to as ISIS).

As with violent non-state actors elsewhere in the region, the emergence of IS is inextricably connected to the problem of state legitimacy in Iraq. The dramatic territorial expansion of IS is linked to the failings of the Iraqi state since the US invasion of 2003 and especially the sectarian approach pursued by Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister of the country from 2006 to 2014. Maliki, a leading figure in the Shia *Dawa* party, systematically alienated political opinion in the country, in particular the Sunni minority that had dominated public life since Iraqi independence in 1932. After taking office, Maliki oversaw a system characterised by the systematic exclusion and harassment of Sunnis, the emergence of shadowy Shia militias suspected of murder, the politicisation and corruption of the judiciary and the security services, and a military apparatus in which battle commands were reportedly for sale to the highest bidder. The inability of Maliki to transcend the mistrust of Iraq's Sunni minority characterised his time in office, during almost all of which he enjoyed the support, however grudging it may have been, of both the US and Iran, the most significant power-brokers in the country. The alienation of Sunnis and other Iraqis has created fertile ground for the expansion of radical opposition to central government in Baghdad.

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However, ISIS is not the only non-state actor that is active in Iraq. Indeed, the expansion of the group has provoked the emergence (or re-emergence) of others seeking to repel its further expansion and to expel it from territory already under its control. Non-state anti-ISIS forces include Dwekh Nawsha, an armed Assyrian Christian group established in 2014 and the Sinjar Resistance Units (SRU), a Yazdi militia which emerged in response to the takeover by ISIS of the Sinjar province, the Yazdi heartland in Iraq. The SRU, in turn, have been supported and trained by the Kurdish People's Party (PKK). Shia

militias, backed by Iran, have also been prominent in fighting against ISIS. However, some have been accused of war crimes and human rights abuses against the Sunni population. Amongst other things, this risks deepening the alienation of Iraqi Sunnis which provides increasingly fertile ground for ISIS support.

Syria

The conflict that developed in Syria after the violent suppression of the initial protests against the regime of Bashar al-Assad quickly morphed into a widespread and multi-layered insurgency. The conflict between the Syrian regime and anti-regime non-state actors has cost at least 200,000 lives to date. Three million people are estimated to have fled to neighbouring countries while a further 6.5 million are internally displaced (out of a total population of 22 million).

According to US intelligence reports, by February 2014, there were between 75,000 and 115,000 anti-regime insurgents organised in 1,500 armed groups of widely varying political orientations. Although many within the opposition to the regime share antipathy towards the brutality of the regime and of ISIS, there remain significant divisions over tactics, strategy and long-term goals. Anti-regime non-state actors in Syria, as elsewhere include Islamist and non-Islamist elements while there are significant divisions within the Islamist camp between those who oppose the violent extremism of ISIS and other militias such as *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham*.

ISIS controls large areas of the north east of the country as well as some areas on the borders with Turkey and Iraq. In 2014, it was estimated that ISIS, *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Ahrar al-Sham* had 26,000 members, including 12,000 foreign fighters, of whom 1,000 were Europeans and 100 were US citizens. In late 2013, a number of Islamist militias set up the Islamic Front and moved to evict ISIS from areas of Syria under its control. The Islamic Front has less clear-cut relations with *Jabhat al-Nusra*, with which it has cooperated on some occasions, while engaging in conflict on others.

Also ranged against the regime is the Free Syria Army (FSA), which was formed in August 2011 by army defectors who sought the removal of the Assad

regime. The FSA consists of a number of disparate armed groups – some secular and some Islamist in orientation. However, it is not a unified, cohesive fighting force although several attempts have been made for it to become as such.

Conclusion

The emergence of violent non-state actors in the Middle East in recent years is correlated with the growing weakness of many states in the region. States with low levels of legitimacy are unable to maintain the loyalty of many within their populations. When such states resort to repression they typically provoke opposition. Similarly, when states exclude significant elements of their populations through neglect, lack of capacity or some other form of discrimination, they can create the conditions within which violent non-state actors emerge. Where the State fails to provide security or other basic services, violent non-state actors can move in to provide alternative governance, services and collective goods thus increasing their own legitimacy in the process. The weakness of central state institutions in Libya and Yemen together with the exclusionary and repressive practices of the State in Iraq and Syria have combined with other factors to prompt the emergence of an array of violent non-state actors that pose significant threat to domestic and regional security. However, the structural context from which violent non-state actors emerge make appropriate policy responses, on both the domestic and international levels more difficult to construct. Ad hoc military strategies can address the problem of violent non-state actors in the immediate term. They cannot, however, resolve the problems of weak state legitimacy and capacity or the absence of effective state institutions, which often constitute the backdrop against which such actors emerge. The situation is further complicated by a paradoxical aspect of the nature of non-state actors in the Middle East. As is the case, elsewhere, when non-state actors take up arms against regimes in some states, quite often they do so with the support of others. To this extent, the 'non-state' component of those actors may be quite diluted. This has already been visible for some time in

the cases of Hamas in Palestine and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Each of these non-state actors has enjoyed the support of Syria and, especially, Iran while retaining significant autonomy over their behaviour. Likewise, the conflicts in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen have drawn an array of regional actors into the fray in support of one involved group or another. The UAE and Qatar have backed conflicting sides in Libya. Saudi Arabia, several Gulf states, Turkey and Iran have all been associated with different armed groups in the Syrian conflict. Iran supports Shia militias fighting ISIS in Iraq and supports the Houthis in Yemen in the face of Saudi opposition. Thus the problem of violent non-state actors in the Middle East requires solutions that are located not merely at the local level but also at the broader geopolitical levels. Ad-hoc responses that target these groups without addressing the structural conditions that promote their emergence are unlikely to have any long-term prospects for success.

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