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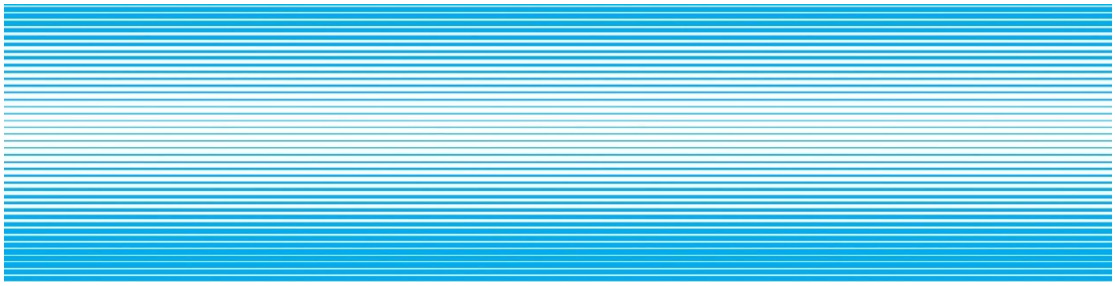

Alliances with Violent Non-State Actors in Middle East Conflicts: Between Theory and Practice

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A decade of regional turmoil in the Middle East has heightened the role of violent non-state actors (VNSA), which have become both a critical tool and a decisive element in shaping political landscapes and inter-state competition between regional powers. This article focuses on the role of violent non-state actors in Middle East politics within the context of alliances and from a theoretical and empirical point of view. It describes how states and VNSA use each other to increase their leverage in a given conflict or in the broader regional environment. What do notable examples of such relationships tell us about the nature of alliances between states and VNSA? And how do these cross-border proxy alliances affect statehood, and more broadly, regional stability?

One of the ramifications of the Arab Spring and its aftermath, has been the growing proliferation of non-state actors (NSA) and violent non-state actors (VNSA). Joining the armed groups that have operated in the Middle East in recent decades, such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon and other theatres, are new militant organizations in the regional landscape. Among them are jihadist organizations, some of which are official branches of al-Qaeda; the Islamic State (IS); local militias such as the Houthis in Yemen; the multiple armed opposition groups operating during the war in Syria; the armed militias aligned with the two rival governments in Libya; and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMU) in Iraq.

The increasing role of VNSA has generated a dynamic whereby major global powers such as Russia and the United States, as well as regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, confront each other by collaborating with non-state forces. VNSA, therefore, have become increasingly decisive in shaping not only intra-state but also interstate power struggles.

Non-State Actors and Alliances in IR Literature

Non-state actors are defined as "actors which are at least in principle autonomous from the structure and machinery of the state, and of the governmental and intergovernmental bodies below and above the formally- sovereign state."Violent non-state actors are defined as organizations that use illegal violence to reach their goals, thereby contesting the state's monopoly on violence. Their existence is not new to the international political and security landscapes, and hence it is hardly surprising that the focus on VNSA among scholars has grown significantly since the end of the Cold War.

Still, despite their growing and unequivocal prevalence, their role in shaping the political order has earned insufficient attention. The analytical lapse often stems from the dominance of the "state-centric approach," whereby the state is the primary and exclusive actor in the political system. This bias is evident in the literature concerning alliances, starting from Walt's classic definition: "A formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. It assumes some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both parties." Even in more recent studies about alliances, NSA and VNSA are hardly mentioned, or conceived of as playing a secondary role.

However, in the global international system, and in the Middle East in particular, one cannot fully comprehend dynamics and key events without taking into account VNSA and their interface with state actors. A more nuanced view of the region, which acknowledges the simultaneous presence and interaction between these types of actors, enables a more accurate assessment.

Alliance Balance sheet

Alliances between states and VNSA embody both advantages and disadvantages. For the state's patrons, the use of local VNSA provides combat advantages and often spares them direct military involvement. It also ensures the state's ability to project power and deter distant enemies. Furthermore, VNSA are less expected to "play" according to conventional rules and international norms compared to states. Therefore, an alliance affords the state more manoeuvrability, as it allows it to shed direct responsibility for its partner's actions.

For the VNSA, state support lends greater empowerment by strengthening their military capabilities, as they enjoy the best of both worlds: the advantages of irregular warfare, and the advantages of receiving more sophisticated and advanced weapons. Allying with VNSA also poses some risks, as the state party does not have full control over VNSA, with fewer constraints governing a non-state group. The state, therefore, could potentially lose its absolute hold over the behavioural proclivities of the VNSA. In addition, sustaining the alliance over time requires the state to invest extensive resources in the form of substantial funding, in order to ensure that its proxies will be effective. For its part, the VNSA might gradually lose its autonomy. It would likely take more risks and expose itself to counter actions by its rivals (as well as by its sponsor state's rivals).

Alliances with Violent Non-State Actors in the Middle East

In much of the Middle East, governance is structured and regulated by more than one actor, giving VNSA room to compete for – or share – power with the formal government authority. One example of this interaction can be found in the past decade in Syria, in which the combination of a formal state apparatus and a variety of VNSA – including armed rebel groups, Iranian-Shiite militias, Kurds (as well as traditional NSA such as humanitarian organizations and other civilian movements) – has created a division of power between the many actors. Interaction between VNSA and external states, such as Russia, Israel, Iran and Turkey, has likewise triggered the emergence of multiple alliances between states and VNSA.

The relationships between states and non-state actors are varied and depend on elements such as the type of VNSA, the geographical space of their cooperation and the strength of their alliance.

a. An alliance may be formed between VNSA and a state within the state's territory based on consent. The driving rationale for this formation is that governments can benefit from domestic non-state actors (violent or not) that complement governance functions by delivering services that the state is either incapable or unwilling to provide. However, although the alliance is based on a desire to cooperate, overtime, it could turn into a source of competition and tension, as the VNSA starts challenging the state's sovereignty.

The case of the Syrian regime-Hezbollah alliance (along with other Shiite militias under Iranian auspices), which has operated in Syria since late 2012, clearly demonstrates this tension. Although its initial goal to save Bashar al-Assad's rule was accomplished, over time these VNSA have challenged Assad's ability to apply full governance by turning into another local authority that exercises control, provides public services and promotes an agenda that is not always aligned with the central regime in Damascus.

Similarly, the Kurds constituted the main force that fought the Islamic State and helped restore regional stability by neutralizing other non-state challengers to Syria and Iraq. Despite the tactical cooperation between the Kurds and the central regime in both states, their achievements prompted them to demand a certain level of autonomy from the regimes, and thereby threaten their domestic sovereignty.

b. A more prevalent type of alliance is between VNSA and an external state/foreign state operating in another state's territory, which often result in proxy wars, as in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Libya.

VNSA may rely on "external" states' financial, political and military support and, in turn, may use these assets to help advance their "patrons'" interests on the ground, contesting the sovereignty and stability of the state where they operate. Moreover, in many cases the external state wishes to project power and influence beyond its own territory and the other state's territory in order to gain leverage in the regional or even the international balance of power.

For decades, Iran has provided support to violent non-state proxies to promote its interests in the region. Hezbollah is the most prominent actor that operates under Iranian auspices, mostly in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. Although founded nearly forty years ago, even today, when Hezbollah is a political entity and military organization with

tremendous domestic and regional influence, it remains highly dependent on Iran. Hezbollah's budget comes almost entirely from Iran, and, aside from weapons provision, the Iranian army and the Quds Force oversee Hezbollah's force buildup, preparedness and training of their fighters. Hezbollah's massive intervention in the war in Syria is a clear demonstration of how Iran uses its proxies in order to leverage its regional stature.

c. Another defining element relates to the identity of the VNSA. It can be local with domestic roots (such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen or the PMU in Iraq) or external (Hezbollah or Russian mercenaries in Syria). Local VNSA have an advantage in that they are not perceived by the local population as an invasive force, but rather as an organic part of the state and its society (though they still may be criticized for undermining stability).

Strategic vs. Tactical Alliances

Alliances between states and VNSA are usually less institutionalized than alliances between states, as they do not adhere to formal agreements/accords and do not oblige the parties to constituteshared institutions. As such, what keeps them from collapsing?

Critical here are the differences between strategic and tactical alliances. Strategic alliances are characterized by high levels of cooperation and are usually based on shared values and ideology – as in the case of Iran and Hezbollah. Hence, these alliances are usually more sustainable and durable. Tactical cooperation occurs when the parties pursue a number of common short-term interests and do not necessarily rely on religious, sectarian or even ideological affinities. In an era of instability, high levels of violence and economic hardship, it seems that tactical alliances have become more prevalent in current Middle East conflicts, with parties aiming to gain power, influence or economic revenues. This is classic realpolitik.

Turkish collaboration with the rebels and jihadists in Syria is exemplified by the use of proxy relations rooted in tactical cooperation, with ensuing local and regional implications. The alliance between the proxy force created by Turkey in 2016, known as the Syrian National Army (SNA), is not based on shared ideological or ethnic identities, but on short-term, mutual security and influence interests: Ankara used this force to secure its southern border against the Islamic State, in 2016, and later, to wage war against the Kurdish YPG militia (People's Protection Units) in northern and northeastern Syria in 2018. For the SNA, Turkey is a strong actor that can provide security and a buffer against the regime's aggression and that of its supporters (Russia and Iran). Although tactical, this alliance expanded to other conflict theatres in the Middle East. While numerous countries that intervened in the Syrian war, including the United States, Israel and Iran, created or supported their own Syrian proxy forces, only Turkey and Russia began exporting theirs to fight in foreign conflicts. The fighters Turkey sent to Libya, starting in late December 2019, and then later to Azerbaijan, were largely drawn from the ranks of the SNA's proxy forces.

Conclusion

The history of the Middle East is littered with violent conflict – interstate wars, civil wars, insurgencies, revolutions, coups, invasions by foreign powers and ethnic and sectarian strife. A closer glance at the contemporary security landscape illustrates the proliferation of violent non-state actors, and highlights the need to extend our understanding of alliances and their utilization within the security system by granting greater analytical weight to the intensity of the impact that VNSA have today.

The prevalence of NSA proves that the familiar nation-states are no longer the sole model organizing international relations, either in the Middle East or the rest of the world. In fact, after a decade of turmoil, states have become weaker and more fragile, hence the appearance of power vacuums. These vacuums are exploited either by VNSA or by states that wish to expand their own influence or fear that their rivals will. The most effective way to do so is by creating alliances with local proxies as a response to proxies of other regional rivals. This dynamic makes de-escalation in contemporary Middle East conflicts intensely difficult.

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