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What's in a name? Re-conceptualizing non-state armed groups in the Middle East

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Abstract

In recent decades, the role and status of non-state armed groups (NSAGs)—generally defined as armed organizations operating outside the control of the state and willing and able to use force to achieve their objectives—has attracted growing scholarly and policy interest; mirroring these groups' seemingly more prominent role in both war-making and post-conflict transitions. This is especially the case when it comes to the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, where a combination of state fragility, conflict and instability has further enhanced the military, political and social importance of NSAGs. But is there a mismatch between the organizational evolution of some NSAGs and the conceptual framework adopted to describe and analyze them? How can recognizing these limitations help better conceptualizing and analyzing violent non-state organizations? In the Middle East, organizations like Hamas or Hezbollah operate simultaneously as sophisticated armed organizations, complex political entities and as highly developed social movement organizations involved in administering and delivering social services at the grassroots level. Elsewhere in the region, the rise of the "Islamic State" offers an entirely distinct example of a socio-political project established by an actor commonly defined as a NSAG. Despite the significant ideological, organizational and strategic differences between these organizations, all three actors fall broadly within the "non-state armed groups" category. Yet, both in their use of armed force, as well in their relationship with the state, these organizations appear as characterized by multi-layered identities and strategies that defy simple labelling. Moreover, these groups' different roles as alternative providers of governance de facto blur the line between state and non-state actor and create an evolving dynamic that simultaneously challenges, contests and redefines concepts like statehood and sovereignty. The article analyzes the organizational evolution of these three actors and, in doing so, it problematizes and challenges the way we currently conceptualize and think about non-state actors in general and non-state armed groups more specifically. This article is published as part of a collection on analyzing security complexes in a changing Middle East.

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