

The role of non-state actors in modern warfare: case studies from Middle East

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ABSTRACT:

The advancements in science and technology has changed the nature of modern warfare, transforming the form of warfare and the actors involved. Non-state actors (NSAs) are being involved more in the modern warfare to achieve the strategic military objective. The purpose of this article is to study the role of NSAs in modern warfare using case studies from Middle East. The study has adopted a qualitative approach collecting data from secondary sources like peer-reviewed journals, government reports and online website. The findings of the present research have essentially focused on the rise of NSAs in the Middle East, through historical records it can be seen that Arab Uprisings in 2011 and many other smaller wars in the region had created a power vacuum which the NSAs have taken advantage of to rise in power. Case studies on three of the prominent NSAs of the region have been carried out to illustrate the differences in their activities and origin and their influence over the region. The impact of these NSAs on regional stability and security has been discussed because these terrorist organisations do not follow international laws and regulations, making it hard to enforce them, the implications of global policies and recommendations to de-escalate conflicts have also been included within the research.

Keywords: NSA, Middle East, warfare, terrorist, Arab Uprisings, Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS

1. Introduction

NSAs have emerged as critical players in modern conflicts, especially in the Middle East. Saifullah & Ahmad (2020) argue that NSAs are considered as both protagonist and antagonist in different chronicles of international politics. In this context, NSAs can be defined as groups those who challenge the legitimacy of the states. NSAs are not a contemporary concept but rather have evolved over centuries, from mercenaries and insurgents to terrorist organizations and transnational criminal groups. The number of non-state conflicts has significantly increased over the years, with a total of 75 non-state conflicts occurring in 2023 (Dyvik, 2024a).

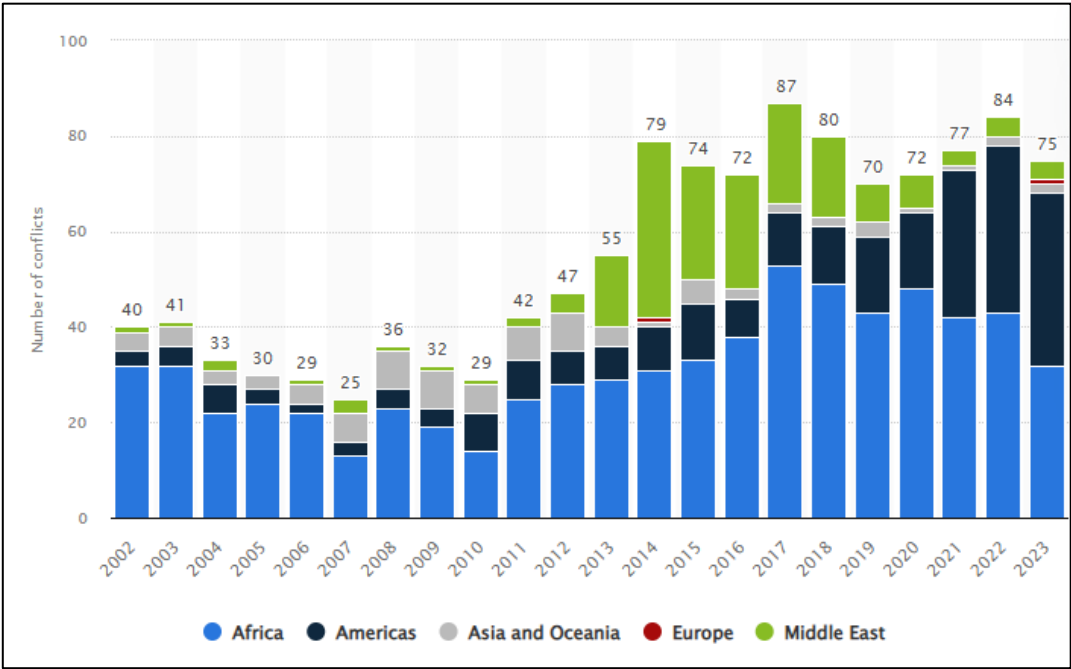


Figure 1: Non-state conflicts worldwide, 2022 to 2023
(Source: Dyvik, 2024a)

The rise of NSAs have not only significantly challenged the traditional state-centric model of warfare but also has implications for global security dynamics. They have emerged as a formidable force in local and international conflicts because of their ability to exploit power vacuums. Looking at the Middle East, NSAs have shaped the geopolitical dynamics of the region and poses significant challenge to security. Abbas et al. (2024) state that NSAs have become more powerful in the Middle East through foreign state sponsorship and comprised state’s integrity. The number of fatalities due to non-state conflicts was highest in Syria between Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Dyvik, 2024b). These NSAs have been using a range of strategies and tactics, using both conventional and irregular methods to achieve their objective and gain influence.

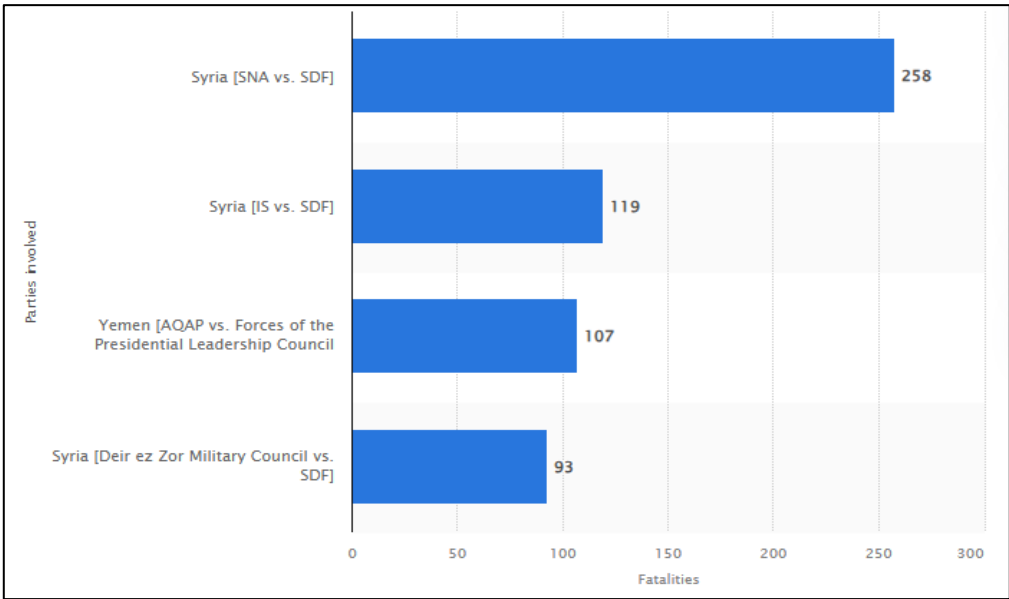


Figure 2: Fatalities due to non-state conflicts in Middle East, 2023
(Source: Dyvik, 2024b)

Hence, the aim of this article is to understand the role of these NSAs in modern warfare using case studies in a bid to understand their impact on national security.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Past studies

The involvement of NSAs have been quite significant in modern warfare, especially in the Middle East. Analysing the cases of Syria and Nagaron-Karabakh, Petrosyan (2024) argue that NSAs have key role in modern warfare by transforming the scale and form of war. Yeşiltaş & Kardaş (2018a) also argue that the NSAs in the Middle-East have completely transformed military geopolitics and ideology since the Arab Springs. Using the case study of Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun brigades, Azizi & Vazirian (2023) have highlighted the way NSAs have reduced the financial and human costs of Tehran while securing their interests in the Syrian conflict. Yeşiltaş & Kardaş (2018b) has explained the way NSAs impact the relationship between security provision and state by shaping militarization, warfare recruitment patterns and collective consciousness. Apart from that, Kozera & Güler (2020) argue that modern warfare includes the greater use of NSAs as proxies while highlighting the need for greater scrutiny of this growing tactic. Michnik & Plakoudas (2023) discuss that use of NSAs as proxies has benefited the USA in the Syrian Civil War but has led to other conflicts for the nations. Looking at the ISIS case, Clancy (2018) argue that NSAs engage themselves in irregular warfare, leading them to seize territory and operate openly. Naumkin & Kuznetsov (2020) believe that the involvement of NSAs has shifted the nature of modern warfare in the Middle East from short conventional wars to complex conflicts. Reflecting on the past studies, it can be said that NSAs have become an integral part of modern warfare, having an influence on both conduct and outcome of conflicts.

2.2 Theoretical perspective

The theory that most significantly aligns with the current research is the hybrid warfare theory. The theory states state actors and NSAs both in the contemporary world are using both conventional and unconventional tactics to achieve their military and strategic objectives (Caliskan, 2019). This leads to the inference that the traditional model of warfare is no longer use and rather

irregular tactics and formations, indiscriminate violence or coercion and criminal disorder are also used by the actors at various levels. This particular tactics was greatly associated with state actors but now is also adopted by non-state actors. However, looking at the current scenario, it is found that non-state actors like Hezbollah, ISIS, Hamas and others have adopted the hybrid warfare to counter the superior state military forces (Rauta, 2020). NSAs are no longer reliant on conventional warfare or guerrilla warfare but rather have employed a mix of military aggression, media influence, cyber capabilities and political manoeuvring to undermine their adversaries. The warfare of ISIS are a combination of terrorist tactics, technology and urban warfare, aligning with hybrid warfare theory (Beccaro, 2018). Overall, the hybrid warfare helps explain the way NSAs have managed to remain resilient despite the superior capabilities of state actors, having a significant impact on modern warfare.

2.3 Research Gap

The review of past studies have shown that the research is greatly focused on the role of NSAs in warfare in terms of their military and security implications. There is a lack of research on the impact that NSAs have on governance and political structure and thus can be explored in future studies. Apart from that, most studies have focused on individual NSAs like ISIS rather than multiple to assess the role that they have in modern warfare. This research will try fill this gap by including multiple case studies and provide relevant insights of the impact that these NSAs have on modern warfare.

3. Methodology

This research has adopted a qualitative design to gain insights on the role of non-state actors in modern warfare within the Middle East. The qualitative design has been used alongside case study approach with data being gathered through secondary sources. Secondary sources for the study are peer-reviewed journals, online articles published by top media houses, policy report and government publications. The criteria for case study selection directly involves the significance of particular NSAs in shaping modern conflicts in the region. The reliability and validity of the research is established by the incorporation of data from multiple sources and analysing it rigorously to interpret the findings. Apart from that, content analysis has been done to identify patterns and themes for presenting the findings and discussions in the next section.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Rise of Non-State Actors in the Middle East

Since the end of the Cold War, powers in the Middle East have continued to shift, as non-state actors (NSAs) rose, the predominance of the state has declined. Armed NSAs operating outside of government regulations of the nation are a major threat towards the hierarchical order and define the traits in both global and regional politics (Darwich, 2021). The political instability in the Middle East has led to the establishment of a large number of armed NSAs in the region, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas, and Hezbollah being the most prominent ones. Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, NSAs have been responsible for the collapse of several countries in the region, namely Syria, Libya and Yemen (Abubakar & Wapmuk, 2021). These NSAs are very diverse from one another, while Hezbollah is institutionalized and operates within the state, Al-Qaeda works in parallel to the government. While other organisations such as Hamas are operating as quasi-states. The Arab Uprisings in the region have therefore completely shifted the geo-political structure of the regions, these groups work outside of the traditional setup and are major players in regional conflicts.

Mousavi Shafaei & Golmohammadi (2022) in their research has suggested that the regional supremacy trap has been the main reason for the chaos and power vacuum in the Middle East, the trap draws in powerful NSAs from the neighbouring regions and results in cumulative conflict. The study blamed the US for creating a power vacuum in the region, the constant instability in the region has turned the Middle East into an unstable zone. The Syrian civil war has been responsible for the creation of the power vacuum in the region, and although the main battle on the ground is being carried out by Syria several regional powers have been providing patronage to take control over the regional struggle. Through the support of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran has tried to fulfil its regional goals of preserving Assad's rule. Iran is seen to back al-Houthi in Yemen, Shia-led demands in Bahrain and other radical movements all across the region, showing the harm, the power vacuum has created. The NSAs have become the key drivers of the region as polarisation has led to the promotion of instability within the region (Aljebori, 2024). The Syrian regime is seen to maintain good links with Iran to defend itself from the Saudi and Qatari forces, highlighting the strongholds NSAs have created.

4.2 Case Studies from Non-State Actors in the Middle East

Hamas is a Palestinian terrorist organisation whose main purpose is to engage in armed conflict with Israel and destabilize the Middle East to diminish regional security. Hamas is however a non-state actor, the persistence of the terrorist organisation shows the Neo-Gramscian understanding of counter-hegemonic forces (Katz, 2025). Hamas stands as a form of resistance against both

Israeli occupations as well the Arab states that have normalized their relationships with Israel. The conflict between both countries has been created as a result of nationalistic and ideological legitimacy and therefore Hamas sees itself as the protector of Palestine. The case study of Hamas also reveals its long-standing relationship with Iran which uses Hamas as a proxy to practice its influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Dekel, 2024). Research reveals that the Israeli-Hamas conflict is significantly different from the Arab Uprisings, as the conflict is more entrenched and shows the improper power balance in the region between Iran and the Gulf states.

The relationship which exists between Hezbollah and Iran reveals the ideological ties between both countries and a joint effort to take control over the regional powers. Initially, research shows that the relationship had a Patron and proxy dynamic but the ideological connections between both countries have helped to transform the relationship (Al-Aloosy, 2023). Hezbollah has existed within the region and has played as a key player for decades; the terrorist group not only receives funding from within Lebanon but also from businesses abroad. The main target of Hezbollah remains Israel and they take more political power within Lebanon (Bagheri, Basiri & Yazdani, 2022). The close military connection between both countries is evident through the regional conflicts, the group has also started training other Shia groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen to destabilize the region further and maintain strong ideological relationships with Iran.

The Third NSA that will be observed within the research is ISIS, the terrorist organisation is an extremist group that originated from the remnants of al-Qaeda, the group that used regional instability to gain power and prosperity in the Middle East (Cordesman & Toukan, 2022). The ideological beliefs of ISIS are often copied by other terrorist organisations the group re-emerged and started gaining territories in 2011, but a strict campaign led by the US has resulted in the ISIS suffering considerable losses. However, after the US shifted its attention towards Syria, the terrorist group has again risen, between the first 5 months of 2020, ISIS carried out 600 planned attacks in Iraq and Syria (Cengiz, Karademir & Cinoglu, 2022). Therefore, although the terrorist organisation has lost some of its prominence in the region, it still acts as a major power.

4.3 Impact of Non-State Actors on Regional Security

As NSAs operate within a country outside of government jurisdiction, their activities erode the sovereignty of the state. These groups constantly undermine the control of the state and prevent them from actively enforcing law and order in the country (Luitel, 2024). The threats of NSAs can be transnational, political, and socioeconomic, furthermore, the downfall of diplomacy has resulted in NSAs carrying out parallel negotiations among the other multi-track diplomacies. Research shows that the NSAs maintain their intricate network of diplomacy which has helped with substantial capital control for the organisation but destabilised the nation even more. The influence of NSAs in the Middle East has also impacted regional stability, as these terrorist organisations have no respect for national borders, they often spread over neighbouring countries to create problems (Hili, 2024). Some of the NSAs are backed by non-state sponsors and foreign governments and therefore this also complicates the relationship with different nations and creates ideological problems. Proxy wars are a complex phenomenon. China, Russia and Iran are the primary users of this hybrid warfare to gain regional control and harass the neighbouring foreign powers (Watts et al., 2023). Proxy wars help amplify geopolitical competition in the region as they destabilize the region and create power vacuums, resulting in shifting alliances and fragmentation.

4.4 Policy Implications and Recommendations

Countering the terrorism of NSAs and holding them accountable for their actions is often hard for nations because these terrorist organisations operate independently within a nation without the support of the government (Maddocks, 2022). As a result, they cannot be held up against international laws and jurisdictions. International laws assume states to be the predominant actors on the world stage, and the harmful conduct of the NSA cannot be attributed to a state, choosing to act via proxies helps these organisations to evade international legal obligations (Streck, 2021). The study therefore suggests that building legitimacy continues to remain a struggle, due to the lack of democratic legitimacy, efforts towards stopping NSA influence continue to be troublesome and inconsistent. Based on these findings the following recommendations have been made:

- In order to de-escalate the conflict and promote regional stability, establishing open communication is highly important, communication channels need to be established between the ruling government and the NSAs for negotiating terms and building trust.
- Dissatisfaction and political turmoil have given birth to many of the existing NSAs and therefore indulging in inclusive political processes can help with addressing the disparities and acknowledging past mistakes.
- The security and government structures of the government need to be reformed for better accountability and inclusivity, this helps with strengthening the institutions and reducing the level of corruption.

5. Conclusion

As concluding remarks, the main findings of the article have focused on the rise of NSAs in the Middle East, the study has closely shown how since the Arab Uprisings in 2011, many regional NSAs have risen all across the Middle East with the ambition of gaining more power. The research has focused on Hamas, Hezbollah and ISIS, each of the terrorist organisation performs outside of the state jurisdiction and as a result they cannot be bound by international laws. The research has carried out brief case studies on each of these NSAs to highlight their motivation and close ties with neighbouring nations which backs up their terrorist activities within the region. The impact which these NSAs have on regional security has been discussed in detail to show how these organisations dismantle government efforts to maintain peace within the nation, the study has also provided recommendations which can be used to improve communication with the NSAs, establish trust and deescalate the problems. At present, NSAs in the Middle East continue to gain power and territory, in order to contain them, proper conversation needs to be established, and their voices need to be heard before taking action against these prolonged proxy wars.

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