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Punching Above Weights:

Combat Effectiveness of Armed Nonstate Actors in the Arab World and Beyond

Strategic Paper No. 2

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"This organization [Daesh] has grown into a military organization that is no longer conducting terrorist activities exclusively but is conducting conventional military operations."

General Jack Keane,

Former Vice Chief of Staff of the United States Army[1]

Introduction

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a steady rise in the military capacities and political roles of armed nonstate actors (ANSAs), challenging the traditional hegemony of armed state actors (ASAs) on the monopoly of force.[2] Security, Military, and Strategic Studies literature has demonstrated a significant rise in the victories of ANSAs over stronger ASAs or the inability of state armies to defeat much weaker nonstate militias.[3] This represents a change in historical patterns. One dataset has shown that in 286 insurgencies between 1800 and 2005, state armies were victors in only 25 percent of cases between 1976 and 2005. This contrasts the 90 percent victories for ASAs over ANSAs between 1826 and 1850.[4] Similar findings were replicated by other studies.[5] Overall, regardless of the dataset employed and the timeframe selected, the findings have been consistent: ANSAs have been altering a historical trend. Traditionally, the consensus was that state actors monopolize the means of violence and therefore are more capable of defeating nonstate actors on the battlefield. The trend applies to very different types of armed nonstate actors from the FARC in Colombia to the Taliban in Afghanistan and including secessionist and irredentist militias in Ukraine, Georgia and beyond. In the Arab World, a challenge to various armed and unarmed state actors is presented by the various cases of the "provinces" of the "Islamic State" organisation (known by its predecessor's Arabic acronym, Daesh), Ansarullah (known as the Houthis) in Yemen, Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) and the Peshmerga Units in Iraq, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (Levant Liberation Organisation or HTS) and People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or YPG) in Syria, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, various Libyan and Sudanese ANSAs, and others. The aforementioned ANSAs have combat capacities and political clout traditionally reserved for state actors. The adversarial dyad of state versus nonstate armed actors does not capture the whole picture, however. Due to a host of factors – including the combat effectiveness of ANSAs – tens of ASAs have formed alliances with ANSAs to fight common enemies (including other ASAs). Perhaps, most notably, these include the relationships between Syria's Democratic Forces (SDF) and the US in Syria; the "United Armed

1 Eli Lake, Jamie Dettmer & Nadette De Visser, "Iraq's Terrorists Are Becoming a Full-Blown Army," *Daily Beast*, 6/11/2014, https://bit.ly/2YzleqX

2 Azmi Bishara, *The Army and Politics: Theoretical Problems and Arabic Examples* (In Arabic) (Doha: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017).

3 Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (forthcoming in 2020); Omar Ashour, "How "Sinai Province" Fight? A Military-Political Analysis of the Sinaian Crisis" (In Arabic), *Siyasat Arabiya*, n. 33 (July 2018), pp. 7-21; Omar Ashour (ed.), *Punching Above Their Weights: Combat Effectiveness of Armed Non-State Actors,* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies), (forthcoming in 2021). See also: the proceedings of the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 24/2/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2K3hYzc

4 J. Lyall & I. Wilson, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization,* vol. 63, no. 1(2009), pp. 67 - 106.

5 B. Connable, & M. C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Arlington: Rand Publications, 2010).

Forces of Novorossiya" and Russia; Hizbullah and Iran; the Yemeni "Security Belts" and the "Libyan National Army" militias and the UAE; among many others.

The victories of ANSAs, the inability of ASAs to defeat them, the operational and strategic alliances between ANSAs and ASAs, as well as the tactical developments in the combat capacities of both have all prompted a number of timely research questions. How did such a revolution in combat performances and political roles happen? Why did it happen? What are the strategic implications of such a trend for the Gulf region, the Arab World, the West and the rest of the world? How will this trend affect hybrid warfare outcomes in the Arab region and beyond? And what are the implications for stability, reforms, and democratisation in the Arab region? All these questions and more were addressed and discussed in the Strategic Studies Unit's second annual conference, "Militias and Armies: Developments in Combat and Political Performances of Armed Nonstate and State Actors." The conference was organised by and held at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). Scholars and practitioners discussed the main themes over seven sessions, focused on anti-status quo ANSAs, pro-status quo ANSAs, hybrid warfare and foreign interventions, transformations from ANSAs to ASAs and from ASAs to ANSAs, and the developments in the tactical capacities. The sessions covered over 30 ANSAs and ASAs in more than 20 countries. A selected number of the conference papers will be published in an edited volume by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies and the Strategic Studies Unit of the Centre will publish other selected papers. The volume will partly analyse the combat performance of ANSAs and the strategic implications of these developments as well as the transformations from ANSAs to ASAs and from ASAs to ANSAs.

The objective of this Strategic Paper is to offer a general framework explaining the military rise of ANSAs. It provides an analytical overview of the phenomenon and the literature that explains it. It presents some of the selected empirical case-studies and addresses some of the implications. The paper is composed of four sections. The following section briefly outlines a literature-based framework explaining the development of combat performances of ANSAs. The third section discusses some of the most salient case-studies of combat-effective ANSAs. The final section provides observations for future research agendas.[6]

Why and How the Weak Wins — Sometimes

Security, Military, Strategic and War Studies literature provides a broad range of explanations as to why weaker armed nonstate actors beat or survive stronger state forces. Classic and contemporary explanations primarily focus on geography, population, external support, military tactics and military

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6   To focus on combat performance and related developments, the paper does not address the widespread human rights violations – some of which amount to crimes against humanity and genocidal practices – committed by the organizations mentioned in this paper. Also, due to space-limitations and thematic focus, the paper does not analyze the violent extremist, sectarianist, separatist, and ethno-nationalist ideologies, narratives, behaviors, and objectives of these organizations; all of which have destructive impacts on social cohesion, civil peace, social and political reforms, and democratisation in the Arab region and beyond. It should be noted here, however, that all of these organizations either used or are still using terrorism tactics, with the aim of intimidation and political-military pressure, indiscriminate mass-murders, or both. These tactics have both military and non-military implications. The paper focuses on the military ones.

strategy. Mao[7] highlighted the centrality of population loyalty for a successful insurgent by stating that an insurgent "must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."[8] The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual concludes that insurgencies represent a "contest for the loyalty" of a mostly uncommitted general public that could side with either the status quo force(s) or the non-status quo force(s), and that success requires persuading this uncommitted public to side with the status quo by "winning their hearts and minds[9]". Thompson,[10] Mason and Krane,[11] Wood,[12] Kalyvas,[13] Kalyvas and Kocher,[14] Braithwaite and Johnson,[15] and Condra and Shapiro[16] show that the brutality of incumbents against local population affects their loyalty, and consequently helps the insurgents in terms of recruitment, resources and legitimacy. General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of US forces in Afghanistan, refers to this effect as the "insurgent math:" for every innocent local the incumbents' forces kill, they create ten new insurgents.[17] Kilcullen earlier coined the term "accidental guerrilla," which is a reference to the consequences of indiscriminate repression leading elements of the local population to be drawn into fighting the incumbents, without having being a priori enemies.[18] There are also alternative arguments, showing that the brutal use of (state) violence against civilians may help the incumbents to defeat insurgents by alienating the locals.

Geography-centric explanations have also been proffered by the literature. Fearon and Laitin[19] stress that rough terrain is one of four critical variables supportive of an insurgency.[20] Mao[21] argued that guerrilla warfare is most feasible when employed in large countries where the incumbents' forces tend to overstretch their lines of supply. Macaulay[22] and Guevara[23] explained how small numbers of armed revolutionaries in Cuba manipulated the topography to outmanoeuvre much stronger forces and gradually move from the second easternmost province of the island towards the capital in the

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7 Mao T., *On Protracted War (*Republic of China: Foreign Language Press, [1938] 1967).

8 Mao T., *On Guerrilla Warfare* (Champaign: University of Illinois, [1937] 1961).

9 David Petraeus, James F. Amos, & John A. Nagl, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 79 - 136.

10 R. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (Praeger, 1966).

11 D.T. Mason, & D. A. Krane, "The Political Economy of Death Squads: Toward a Theory of the Impact of State-sanctioned Terror," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (1989), pp. 175 - 98.

12 E. J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969)

13 S. Kalyvas & Matthew A. Kocher. "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam," *Politics and Society*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2006), pp. 183 - 223.

14 Ibid.

15 A. Braithwaite & S. D. Johnson, "Space-time Modelling of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2001), pp. 31 - 48.

16 L. N. Condra & J. N. Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science,* vol. 56, no. 1 (2012), pp. 167-87

17 B. Deryfus, "How the War in Afghanistan Fuelled the Taliban," *The Nation*, (23 September 2013).

18 D. Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

19 J. D. Fearon, & D. D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review,* vol. 57, no. 1 (2012), pp. 75 - 90.

20 The other three variables are political instability, large population, and poverty.

21 Mao T., *On Protracted War (*Republic of China: Foreign Language Press, [1938] 1967)

22 N. Macaulay, "The Cuban Rebel Army: A Numerical Survey," *The Hispanic American Historical Review,* vol. 58, no. 2 (1978), pp. 284 - 95.

23 E. Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare,* (North Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1961).

West. Galula[24] was more deterministic when it came to geographical explanations. In his seminal work, Counterinsurgency Warfare, he stresses that "the role of geography [...] may be overriding in a revolutionary war. If the insurgent, with his initial weakness, cannot get any help from geography, he may well be condemned to failure before he starts."[25] Boulding[26] introduced the concept of the "Loss of Strength Gradient" (LSG) to geographical explanations. Briefly, it means that the further the fight is from the centre, and the deeper it is into the periphery, the more likely for the incumbents' forces to lose strength. Schutte[27] builds on and modifies this concept to argue that it is accuracy, not necessarily strength, which gets lost as a function of distance. He introduces the "Loss of Accuracy Gradient" (LAG): incumbents' long-range attacks are more indiscriminate and less accurate (in killing insurgents) than short-range ones. Hence, civilian alienation becomes a function of distance, as a result of inaccuracy and indiscriminate killings.[28]

Other scholars highlighted the importance of foreign support. In their study of 89 insurgencies, Connable and Libicki[29] argued that insurgencies that "benefitted from state sponsorship statistically won a 2:1 ratio out of decided cases [victory is clear for one side]." Once foreign assistance stops the success ratio of the insurgent side fell to 1:4,[30] This is relevant only to clear-cut victories, not to mixed cases or enduring insurgencies and reflects the impact of hybrid warfare as a determinant of insurgent victory (or defeat).

Finally, scholars explained insurgent victory based on either their military tactics and/or their military strategy. In terms of tactics, Lyall and Wilson[31] argue that modern combat machinery has undermined the incumbents' ability to win over civilian population, form ties with the locals, and gather valuable human intelligence. Jones and Johnston,[32] Kilcullen,[33] and Sieg[34] argue that insurgent access to new technologies in arms, communications, intelligence information, transportation, infrastructure, and organizational/administrative capacities has allowed them to enhance their military tactics to levels historically reserved for state-affiliated armed actors. This significantly offset the likelihood of being defeated by incumbents' forces. Strategically, Arreguín-Toft[35] offers a complex model of strategic interactions between militarily weaker actors and their stronger opponents. His study concludes

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24   D. Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1964).

25   Ibid, p. 26.

26   K. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense: A General Theory* (New York: Harper, 1962).

27   S. Schute, "Geography, Outcome, and Casualties: A Unified Model of Insurgency," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (March 2014), pp. 1 - 28.

28   Ibid, p. 8; one of the most publicized LAG examples in Egypt is the killing of the Mexican tourists by the incumbent's Apache helicopters in September 2015. The killings of Egyptian civilians due to LAG are common Sinai, but much less publicized.

29   Connable & Libicki, *How Insurgencies End,* pp. 8 - 9.

30   Ibid.

31   See: Lyall & Wilson, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars."

32   S. Jones & Patrick Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1 - 25.

33   D. Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

34   M. Seig, "How the Transformation of Military Power Leads to Increasing Asymmetries in Warfare?" *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2014), pp. 332 - 356.

35   Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, vol. 1 no. 26 (2001), pp. 93 - 128.

that weaker forces can overcome resource paucity by employing opposing strategies (direct versus indirect) against stronger ones. A guerrilla warfare strategy (an indirect strategy) is the most suitable to employ against direct attack strategies by stronger actors including "blitzkriegs."[36]

The Empirics: Selected Case-Studies of Combat-Effectiveness

Combat effectiveness is a concept that reflects the quality of the performance of a fighting force on the battlefield, usually based on its skill, will, and other factors. It is one aspect of the overall military effectiveness of an armed organisation. Military effectiveness is a wider concept reflecting the quality of the military performance on a strategic level. It describes the capabilities to translate combat and non-combat resources into military power to achieve the strategic and/or grand-strategic objective(s). It should be stressed here that neither combat effectiveness nor the wider concept of military effectiveness are sole determinants of battle or war outcomes. Cleary, they are among the main factors influencing outcomes, but other factors can and will interact with them to engender battle or war outcomes between state and nonstate armed actor(s) (or between armed adversaries in general, regardless of their types).[37] These include some of the aforenoted factors such as geography, state-sponsorship/interventions, and popular support. This is in addition to simpler quantifiable and non-quantifiable factors such as the sheer number of soldiers/fighters, quality of weaponry, quantity of ammunitions, morale/"moral force," suitable organisation, intelligence breakthroughs, maintenance and logistics, topography, climate, and even mere flukes. Hence, highly combat-effective forces can still be defeated by larger forces or by peculiar conditions and thus fail to achieve their tactical, operational and/or strategic objectives.

Overall, several elements of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks go far to explain the developments in the combat performances of ANSAs operating in the greater Middle East region; including Daesh, HTS, Hezbollah, Ansarullah (Houthis), the Taliban, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and others. These ANSAs were able to innovate in terms of their tactical and operational performance to offset the results of relative weaknesses and resource-paucity. The sections below overview selected case-studies of ANSAs that exhibited significant development in their combat performance.

Daesh

The case of Daesh remains the most puzzling of all. How can a widely despised,[38] massively outnumbered and ludicrously outgunned organisation expand to occupy over 120 cities, towns and

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36   According to Arreguín-Toft, strong actors won 76 percent of all same-approach strategic interactions, while weak actors won 63 percent of all opposite-approach interactions. Ibid, pp. 100, 111, 122.

37   Omar Ashour (ed.), *Punching Above Weights: Combat Effectiveness of Armed Non-State Actors* (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies), (forthcoming in 2021). See also: the proceedings of the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 24/2/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2K3hYzc

38   See Arab Opinion Index survey on ISIL, in: "The 2017 - 2018 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief," *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies*, at: https://bit.ly/38xi9OF, pp. 34 - 36.

villages, from the southern Philippines (City of Marawi) to western Libya (City of Sabratha)?[39] For years, the organisation endured and/or survived military coalitions made up of over 150 armed state and nonstate actors. The traditional factors associated with insurgency success, such as the support of an external power, popular support from the disaffected population, sanctuary, geography, topography or other factors, which might, individually or in combination, go some way to explain Daesh's combat performance are found not to be especially significant.[40] The attention should be more focused on meso-level analysis and on both ISIS military strategies and tactics. A forthcoming book published by ACRPS and Edinburgh University Press — titled *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* — investigates the military-making of ISIS/IS and their predecessors and focuses particularly on a sample of IS urban battles in Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi, Raqqa (City and Governorate), Derna, Sirte and Northeastern Sinai. As a sample of technical and tactical innovations discussed, Daesh has mounted captured artillery pieces on looted tanks chassis, replaced cannons with anti-aircraft guns when it deemed necessary, up-armoured infantry fighting vehicles, mounted BMP turrets on 4x4 vehicles, upgraded T-55, T-62, T-72 tanks with locally manufactured armour (some were even made of shell-casings), and converted flatbed trucks into weapon platforms. Daesh's combat units used commercial drones to deliver IEDs and to guide suicide vehicle borne-IEDs (SVBIEDs), utilised SVBIEDs as precision bombs and guided rocket-barrages, converted 7-ton large SVBIEDs into cruise-like missiles/human-guided land-torpedoes and executed Marine-like infantry-breaching sequences in combination with SVBIEDs. Daesh's combat units employed commercial GPS applications on civilian smart-gadgets to enhance the accuracy of their mortar-shots, teleoperated sniper-rifles to offset the snipers from the weapons for protection, outflanked tanks with swarming anti-tank kill techniques, and pioneered in the execution of several *inghimassiyun*-tactics (suicide guerrilla formations) in both urban terrorism and conventional battles, among numerous other tactical-level innovations. This brief sample is neither an exhaustive list of Daesh's tactical innovations, nor does it include Daesh's innovations in strategic shifts or at the operational-level of warfare.[41]

Hizbullah

Several military experts have more than once concluded that Hizbullah and Daesh have fought "considerably better than most Arab armies of the modern era, state or nonstate."[42] Although — unlike Daesh — Hezbollah's levels of combat and military effectiveness can be explained by the "traditional variables" and others in the above review. For example, the organisation has enjoyed almost four-decades of intense and sustained state-sponsorship. It also had and continues to have popular support among large segments of the Lebanese society. Between 1992 and 2012 especially —

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39   See: Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2020).

40   Ibid.

41   For an analysis of Daesh's strategic shifts, operational art of warfare and tactical innovations, see: Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming in 2020).

42   Kenneth Pollack, *Armies of Sands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 996. Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming 2020).

before its involvement in suppressing the Syrian revolution — Hizbullah also enjoyed popular support among large segments of other Arab societies that ebbed and flowed but consistently transcended ideological, sectarian and religious lines. Daesh had none of that. Still, Hizbullah certainly merits further exploration when it comes to its military build-up, training, doctrine, tactics, operational art and strategies. Many military pundits and security studies scholars were surprised by Hizbullah's performance in the June 2006 war. This was especially the case when it came to its capabilities in electronic warfare, concealment, skilful anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) teams that dealt with advanced Israeli tanks and their reactive armours, as well as the size and range of Hizbullah's rockets, both guided and unguided.

One dimension that was addressed in the SSU annual conferences was deterrence: how was Hizbullah able to deter Israel? The argument is that despite occasional skirmishes and a 33-day war, Hizbullah and Israel maintained a defensive posture while improving their offensive capabilities since 2000. According to one interpretation, even the 2006 war was a miscalculated escalation largely by Israeli politicians. Beyond deterrence, Hizbullah has evolved, adapted and enhanced its combat capacities to unprecedented levels before and during the Syrian civil war. The organisation enhanced its tunnel-warfare tactics as well as both its tactical and strategic intelligence. It managed to infiltrate the IDF's communication systems on multiple occasions. It also enhanced both quantitates and qualities of short- and mid-range surface-to-surface missiles, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), artillery and armoured pieces. The organisation has practiced and developed its urban and siege warfare tactics in Syria, which, despite significant causalities, enhanced the overall combat effectiveness of Hezbollah.

HTS

HTS has been another case-study reflecting significant developments in combat performances of Arab-led ANSAs.[43] The coalition of *mainly* northwestern, Syrian armed insurgent organisations — with a local Salafi-Jihadist ideological bent — was built on *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JN or Al-Nusra Front) that declared its existence in January 2012. The latter significantly evolved from a mere Syrian proxy of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in 2012 that used a mix of terrorism and guerrilla tactics to a coalition of insurgents controlling territory of about 3,100 km² within Idlib Governorate and boasting conventional, guerrilla and terrorism capacities and area-denial capabilities in 2020. Since 2018, HTS clashed with both Daesh and al-Qaida loyalists. After eight years of developments and mutations, HTS today combines similar levels of political savviness like those of Hezbollah, with the levels of tactical effectiveness close to that of Daesh. Part of this is due to the background of some of its commanders; a few were former ISI commanders with combat experiences in Iraq, others had political-negotiation experiences with multiple states and state-sponsored armed actors in Syria. HTS was also able to extract significant resources from its governance structures in Idlib and beyond. Like Daesh, HTS still

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43   Hamzeh al-Mustapha, ''Combat Performance of al-Nusra Front in the Syrian Civil War,'' [in Arabic] paper presented at the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 23/02/2020, accessed on 14/4/2020, at:
https://bit.ly/2RBCTO5

faces major challenges to survive in Northwestern Syria. Unlike Daesh, it does have some relative local support in the areas it controls and even in some of the areas it denies. HTS has also exhibited relative behavioural pragmatism, usually justified in ideological jargon and narratives.

Ansarullah (Houthis)

Another impressive case of successful military build-up, adaption, innovation, expansion and endurance by a nonstate-turned-state-like entity is that of Ansar Allah (Supporters of God or Ansarullah). The organisation is better known by the family name of its charismatic godfather-like figure Badr al-Din al-Houthi. Its combat units used the name of Ansarullah as early as 2007, during their fourth war with Ali Abdullah Salih's regime. Militarily, Ansarullah progressed from an organisation that was incapable of defending its military commander (Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi) in its own rugged strongholds in 2004[44] to an organisation capable of taking over Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, ten years later and of delivering medium-range ballistic missiles and armed drones into the hearts of Riyadh and Dubai while fighting back Saudi- and Emirati-sponsored forces in Yemen. The organisation steadily developed from mainly guerrilla warfare and rural terrorism tactics in 2004 to quasi-conventional tactics in 2010; by then Ansarullah's company- and small battalion-sized formations were forcing entire Yemeni army brigades into surrender while briefly occupying settlements and rugged mountainous positions inside Saudi Arabia.

Still, the in-depth saga of the military adaptation and rise of Ansarullah is yet to be written. If Daesh has written a textbook on how to effectively fight, expand and endure without population support, state-sponsorship and/or rugged geography, Ansarullah is an example of how to manipulate the aforenoted macro-level variables to rerise from ashes, strike back at resourceful adversaries, and capture and keep a country's capital despite a disadvantaging environment.

The Taliban (of Afghanistan)

On 6 December 2001, the Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan lost control of its *de facto* capital of Kandahar in less than 60 days after the American-led invasion.[45] The Taliban forces were humiliatingly defeated by a much smaller force; albeit much more advanced and combat-effective. The force was composed of 350 US Special Forces soldiers, 100 CIA agents, and about 15,000 Afghan fighters; against a Taliban army of 50,000 soldiers and fighters, at minimum.[46] The relative ease of overthrowing the ferocious Taliban misled many military and strategic analysts. Even by early 2003, when the Taliban were clearly showing signs of skilful resistance, very few expected the spectacular comeback that had led the US – with Qatari skilful mediation and persistent peacemaking diplomacy – to sign a peace agreement with the organisation.

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44   Ansarullah could not even prevent the humiliating display of Hussein al-Houthi's body-image placed on the walls of Saada city by the regime's forces. Although, that particular act – among many other moral and counterinsurgency blunders – helped Ansarullah in terms of recruitment and radicalisation of many unaffiliated north-based Zaydi youth.

45   "The Taliban Are Forced Out of Afghanistan," *BBC History*, 18/7/2018, accessed on 18/7/2018, at: https://bbc.in/2O04PIW

46   Other estimates exceeded that figure to reach somewhere between 80,00 and 120,000 fighters. See for example: Bruce Barcott, "Special Forces," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2009.

By 2020, the Taliban have conducted tens of major conventional, quasi-conventional and guerrilla-intensive operations as well as over 1,000 suicide- and suicide-led attacks. The organisation has fought back the US and its allies to a draw; and suicide-bombed its way to an official compromise with the Trump administration.[47] The process by which the Taliban reached this stage was not an easy one, as one of their fighters explained to *Newsweek* about eleven years ago:

> *"It's not easy being in the Taliban. It's like wearing a jacket of fire. You have to leave your family and live with the knowledge that you can be killed at any time. The Americans can capture you and put you in dog cages in Bagram and Guantánamo. You can't expect any quick medical treatment if you're wounded. You don't have any money. Yet when I tell new recruits what they are facing they still freely put on this jacket of fire. All this builds my confidence that we will never lose this war."[48]*

The fast learning curve of the Taliban is notable; not just in tactical and operational domains, but also in ideological/worldview updates and strategic communications serving their overall objectives. The same organisation that banned music and smashed television sets in the streets of Kabul in the 1990s (because it considered them "un-Islamic") is targeting the urban Afghan youth audiences with an innovative and agile social media network powered by the Internet and cellular phones in 2020. This network encompasses Twitter, Facebook and a robust propaganda and media machine.

But the major development in the combat performance of the organisation boils down to the Taliban battlefield tactics. These were assessed during the SSU conference,[49] and they will be further investigated and analysed in a forthcoming edited volume published by the ACRPS.[50] Generally however, the Taliban combat performance has been enhanced due to significant upgrades in technologies and techniques to improve lethality or other effects of existing capabilities at the tactical level (tactical innovations), then shared these capabilities across their organization (knowhow transfer). Overall, the organisation fielded new tactics which marked a stark departure from earlier patterns of behaviour by Afghan insurgents, reflecting organizational innovation capacities.

The PKK

For over three decades, Kurdistan's Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* or the PKK) and its affiliated organisations and offshoots have been leading multiple insurgencies in southeast Turkey,

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47 "Afghanistan: US and Taliban sign historic peace deal hailed as 'momentous day'," *Sky News*, 29/02/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2C8VCM3. For a detailed analysis of the process, see: Omar Ashour (ed.), *Bullets to Ballots: Collective De-Radicalisation of Armed Movements* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, forthcoming in 2021); see also: Jonathan Powell, *Talking to Terrorists,* (London: Vintage, 2015).

48 S. Yousufzai, "The Taliban's Oral History of the Afghanistan War," Newsweek, 25 September 2009, https://bit.ly/2Z3e3L1.

49 Tom Johnson, "The Afghan Taliban's Developments in Combat and Political Performance," paper presented at the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit titled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 23/02/2020, accessed on 14/4/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2RBCTO5.
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50 Ibid.

northeast Syria and northwest Iraq; with a historical capacity to strike in several provinces within the three countries and beyond them. Notably, out of all of the aforementioned ANSAs, the PKK is the only one that locally guerrilla-fought a NATO-member on its own turf. The Turkish armed forces (TSK) is the second largest NATO army in terms of man- and (non-nuclear) firepower and has an impressive combat record.[51] Still the PKK endures and expands, mainly outside of Turkey. Its ability to emerge and rebuild militarily from multiple crushing defeats at the hands of the TSK certainly merits further explanations.

Paradoxically, despite being ideological and battlefield enemies, the rise of Daesh has indirectly led to the enhancement of the combat capacities of the PKK and its YPG allies in Syria. The organisation and its affiliates gradually shifted from mainly rural guerrilla campaigns with urban terrorism operations to quasi-conventional urban warfare with specialised units, while enhancing their guerrilla warfare and the terrorism capacities. The YPG specifically benefited from state-sponsorship (mainly the US-sponsorship, but also other NATO-members such as France) to be able to fight Daesh in 'Ain al-'Arab/ Kobane (September 2014 to February 2015) and afterwards. This sponsorship has helped to build up a degree of expertise in tactical innovations, followed by knowhow (and logistical) transfers to the PKK in 2015. The PKK transferred these upgrades to the urban conflict zones in southeast Turkey. Within these urban environments, the PKK has sought to defend neighbourhoods with snipers, IEDs, barricades/ditches, and ATGMs. The level of sophistication of the PKK's IED-warfare has been much more advanced than any combat performance observed in the 1990s; reflecting the impact of the so-called "Rojava effect."[52]

Future Research: Tactical Observations, Strategic Implications

Future research on the subject(s) of ANSAs' combat performance should take into account all three levels of analysis: macro, meso and micro. This section offers some concluding observations on the macro and meso levels. On the macro-level, the political environment has a major impact in the Arab context. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are still a secondary measure and, in many Arab States, relegated to cosmetic matters as opposed to arms;[53] which proved to be the most effective means to gain and retain political power in most of the region. Hence, ANSAs can endure and expand in a regional context where ASAs' bullets continue to be more effective than popular ballots;[54] where the old/new "norm" is that extreme forms of political

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51   The PKK and Hizbullah have mainly faced highly combat effective ASAs. Daesh, HTS, Ansarullah, the Taliban who have mainly fought local ASAs like the Iraqi, Syrian, Saudi, Afghan, Libyan, Egyptian, Yemeni and other local forces – all with a relatively mediocre combat performance records in both conventional wars and counterinsurgency campaigns. Still, Daesh (and its predecessors) and the Taliban have directly faced as the US forces and their allies on many occasions.

52   Metin Gurcan, "The Rojava Effect: PKK before and after Rojava," paper presented at the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 23/02/2020, accessed on 14/4/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2RBCTO5. See the English version at: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/Events/Militias-and-Armies-Developments-in-Combat-and-Political-Performance-of-Armed-Non-State-and-State-Actors/Pages/VideoGalleryPage.aspx

53   Azmi Bishara, "The Army and Political Power in the Arab Context: Theoretical Problems," *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies*, Research Paper (Mars 2017), accessed on 9/10/2019, at: https://bit.ly/2p0Rh74

54   Omar Ashour, "Ballots to Bullets: Patterns in Transformations from Armed to Unarmed Political Activism," *Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies Papers*, Reports (2/01/2019), accessed on 9/10/2019, at: https://bit.ly/2M0clOu, pp. 1 - 22.

violence are committed by state and nonstate actors and then legitimated by state hyper-nationalist media and/or official religious institutions; and where the eradication of the "other" is perceived as a more legitimate political strategy than compromises and reconciliations.

It is critical to understand that the military rise of ANSAs in the region is a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional politics in it. Sustained political reforms and reconciliation processes may gradually curb that rise on the long-term. Additionally, within and beyond the Arab region, macro-level apolitical variables such as youth bulges, urbanisation (e.g. rural-urban migration), connectivity (e.g. social media, cellular phones, GPS systems) and general technological advancements are notably combined with political variables such as high-levels of corruption, social inequalities of all forms, repression, and weak non-violent conflict-resolution mechanisms and justice systems (including fragile democratic institutions and little-to-no rule-of-law). This is a macro-combustible combination, providing a hospitable environment for socio-political violence and also multiple incentives for building combat-effective ANSAs.[55]

On a meso-level, agency and tactics mattered. Agents challenged (and sometimes overcame) structural factors, perhaps most notably the case of Daesh's predecessor – the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) – and that of Ansarullah. By 2010, ISI was almost destroyed with many critical macro-level variables aligned against it and favouring its enemies (no popular support, no external support, no rugged geography, etc...). Its successor still managed to take over Iraq's second largest city four years later. Hence, what critically mattered there was what the agents *did* with what they had, as opposed to what they actually *had*. The agents' *deeds* – even with limited resources and in unfavourable environments – made the difference in the abovementioned cases and many others examined. Clearly, this works both ways. The vast resources and sustained external support of various Saudi and Egyptian ASAs – as two extreme examples of both combat and military ineffectiveness – did not help them attain favourable outcomes in northern Yemen and northern Sinai respectively. Overall, the abovementioned ANSAs as well as others have shown agency that either successfully resisted and/or manipulated structural strains. Perhaps the best exemplification of resisting structural strains is that of Daesh, and of manipulating structural strains is that of the PKK/YPG.

Agency brings us directly to the tactical and operational levels (as opposed to the strategic ones). Adaptations and innovations in six categories of tactics are notable among the abovementioned ANSAs and beyond them: Drones, VB/IEDs, cyber warfare, tunnel warfare, anti-armour and air-defence man-portable systems (for simplification, DVCTAT). Each of these categories merits further investigation, perhaps within each of the aforementioned ANSAs. The SSU second annual conference thoroughly analysed four of them: drones, VBIEDs, cyber/electronic warfare and tunnel warfare.[56] In terms of drones, Daesh stands out among ANSAs as a "founder," innovator and executioner. No other ANSAs – up to the writing of this study – had air-superiority under 3,500 feet right below the US conventional

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55   Tanisha M. Fazal & Paul Poast, "War Is Not Over What the Optimists Get Wrong About Conflict," Foreign Affairs, November/December 2019, accessed on 7/7/2020, at: https://fam.ag/31QTT8N. For an overview of the macro-level see: Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights,* pp. 21 - 23.

56   Ibid.

air-superiority.[57] Daesh managed to obtain just that during Mosul's 2017 urban battles. Other ANSAs (and even some ASAs) learned from that example, from Central America to Southeast Asia.

Daesh has also pioneered in turning SVBIEDs into an effective battlefield weapon.[58] SVBIEDs gradually became a primary category of tactics by which the organisation was able to capture territory and stave off advances by opposing forces. Throughout the years, Daesh consistently adapted its SVBIED designs based on its operational environment and other factors.[59] Other ANSAs followed with similar modifications in armour, payload organization, concealment, detonation technology, and tactical and operational usages. Advanced SVBIED designs have been shared between various Daesh's "provinces" via knowhow transfers, not only within Iraq and Syria but also globally to "provinces" in Nigeria and the Philippines.[60] These readily available designs could also potentially facilitate a re-emergence of Daesh and/or like-minded organisations in areas where they have been already defeated.

Finally, ANSAs have significantly relied and upgraded two other categories: cyber/electronic warfare and tunnel warfare. ANSAs' cyber-attacks and cyber-based psychological operations have increased exponentially, especially over the past decades.[61] Tunnel warfare has also witnessed significant adaptations and innovations for offensive, counteroffensive and/or defensive actions. The tunnel networks of Mosul, Ramadi, Raqqa, Sirte, Northeast Sinai, Gaza, Kandahar, Faryab, Helmand, Sirnak have directly and indirectly enhanced both the combat and the military effectiveness of relatively weaker ANSAs.

Overall, current and future research on ANSAs' combat performances is likely to impact both scholarly and policy circles; given both the challenges and the opportunities presented to decision-makers and states. ASAs in the region are likely to be challenged in the future. They are also likely to continue forming alliances with ANSAs, given their low-cost and high impact. The policies of "militia-management" in the region is another subject that merits further research, given its widespread usage from Libya to Yemen. The two forthcoming edited volumes published by ACRPS engage some of the abovementioned research questions and further analyse some of the tactical developments and the strategic implications of the political-military rise of ANSAs in the region and beyond.

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57   See: Ashour. *How ISIS Fights,* pp. 70 - 72.

58   Ibid, pp. 106-110; See also: Hugo Kaamaan, "Islamic State SVBIED Development since 2014," paper presented at the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 24/2/2020, accessed on 14/4/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2RAQh4J.
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59   Ibid.

60   Ashour. *How ISIS Fights,* pp. 204 - 205.

61   See for example: Anna Bulakh, "Resilience Building in Response to Russian Asymmetric Warfare in Ukraine," paper presented at the annual conference of the Strategic Studies Unit entitled "Militias and Armies: Developments of Combat Capacities of Armed Non-State and State Actors," Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), Doha, 24/2/2020, accessed on 14/4/2020, at: https://bit.ly/2RAQh4J
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