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## **Militias and Armies:**

Developments in Combat and Political Performance  
of Armed Non-State and State Actor

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**Concept Note**



# Militias and Armies: Developments in Combat and Political Performance of Armed Non-State and State Actors

## Concept Note

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a steady rise in the military capacities and political roles of armed non-state actors (ANSAs), challenging the traditional hegemony of armed state actors (ASAs) on the monopoly of force<sup>(1)</sup>. Security and Strategic Studies literature have demonstrated a significant rise in the victories of ANSAs over stronger ASAs or in the inability of armies to defeat much weaker militias<sup>(2)</sup>. 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% of them between 1976 and 2005. This contrasts the 90% victories for state armies over ANSAs between 1826 and 1850<sup>(3)</sup>. Similar findings were replicated by other studies<sup>(4)</sup>. 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 non-state actors on the battlefield. The trend applies to very different types of armed non-state actors from the FARC in Colombia to the Taliban in Afghanistan and beyond. In the Arab World, the cases of the “Islamic State” organisation (Daesh), Ansarullah (Houthis) in Yemen, Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) and the Peshmerga Units in Iraq, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, various Libyan and Sudanese ANSAs, and others represent a challenge to various armed and unarmed state actors. The aforementioned ANSAs have combat capacities and political clout traditionally reserved for state actors.

The victories of ANSAs and/or the inability of ASAs to defeat them have 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? How will this trend affect armed state actors and hybrid warfare in the region and beyond? And what are the implications for stability, reforms, and democratisation in the region?* All these questions and more will be addressed and discussed in a

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<sup>1</sup> Azmi Bishara, *The Army and Politics: Theoretical Problems and Arabic Examples* (In Arabic) (Doha: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Omar Ashour, *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (forthcoming 2019); Omar Ashour, “How does Sinaa Fight? Political and Military analysis of the Sinaa Crisis” (In Arabic), *Siyasat Arabiyya*, n. 33 (July 2018), pp. 7 - 21.

<sup>3</sup> J. Lyall and I. Wilson, “Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization*, vol. 63, no. 1(2009), pp. 67 - 106.

<sup>4</sup> B. Connable, and M. C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Arlington: Rand Publications, 2010).

symposium titled “*Militias and Armies: Developments in Combat and Political Performances of Armed Non-State and State Actors.*” The Symposium is organised by the Strategic Studies Unit of the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS). Scholars and practitioners will discuss the main themes in 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 developments in tactical capacities. The sessions will cover over 30 ANSAs and ASAs in more than 20 countries. After the symposium, a selected number of papers will be published in an edited volume by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies. The volume will engage with the abovementioned research questions and cover the tactical developments and the strategic implications of the political-military rise of armed non-state actors. This concept note offers a brief, general framework for some of the issues covered in the Symposium.

Security, Military and Strategic Studies literature provides a broad range of explanations to why weaker armed non-state actors beat or survive stronger state forces. Classic and contemporary explanations primarily focus on geography, population, external support, military tactics and military strategy. Mao<sup>(5)</sup> 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.”<sup>(6)</sup> 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<sup>(7)</sup>”. Thompson<sup>(8)</sup>, Mason and Krane<sup>(9)</sup>, Wood<sup>(10)</sup>, Kalyvas<sup>(11)</sup>, Kalyvas and Kocher<sup>(12)</sup>; Braithwaite and Johnson<sup>(13)</sup>, Condra and Shapiro<sup>(14)</sup> show that the brutality of the incumbents against local population affects their loyalty, and therefore helps the insurgents in terms of recruitment, resources and legitimacy. General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, refers to this effect as the “insurgent math:” for every innocent local the incumbents’ forces kill, they create ten new insurgents<sup>(15)</sup>. Kilcullen<sup>(16)</sup> earlier coined

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

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

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

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

9 D.T. Mason, and 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.

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

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

12 Ibid.

13 A. Braithwaite and S. D. Johnson, “Space-time Modeling of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq,” *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, vol. 28, no. 1 (2001), pp. 31 - 48.

14 L. N. Condra and 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

15 B. Deryfus, “How the War in Afghanistan Fueled the Taliban,” *The Nation*, (23 September 2013).

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

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. 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(17) stress that rough terrain is one of four critical variables supportive of an insurgency.(18) Mao(19) argued that guerrilla warfare is most feasible when employed in large countries where the incumbents’ forces tend to overstretch their lines of supply. Macaulay(20) and Guevara(21) explained how small numbers of armed revolutionaries in Cuba manipulated the topography to outmaneuver much stronger forces and gradually move from the second easternmost province of the island towards the capital in the West. Galula(22) 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(23)”. Boulding(24) 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(25) 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 (Schutte 2014, 8).(26)

Other scholars highlighted the importance of foreign support. In their study of 89 insurgencies, Connable and Libicki(27) 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(28). 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).

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

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

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

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

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

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

23 Ibid, p 26.

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

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

26 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. Ibid, p. 8.

27 Connable and Libicki.

28 Ibid, pp. 8-9

Finally, scholars explained insurgent victory based on either their military tactics and/or their military strategy. In terms of tactics, Lyall and Wilson(29) 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(30), Kilcullen(31), and Sieg(32) 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 reserved historically for state-affiliated armed actors. This significantly offset the likelihood of being defeated by incumbents' forces. Strategically, Arreguín-Toft(33) offers a complex model of strategic interactions between militarily weaker actors and their stronger opponents. His study concludes 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".(34)

Several elements of these explanations apply well to organisations operating in the Middle East region, including Daesh, HTS, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Houthis and many others. But certainly, the political environment has a major impact in the Arab World 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(35); which proved to be the most effective means to gain and retain political power in most of the region. Hence, armed non-state actors can endure and expand in a regional context where bullets continue to be more effective than ballots(36); where extreme forms of political violence are committed by state and non-state actors and then legitimated by state media and/or 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 realize that the military rise of armed non-state actors in the region are a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional politics in the region. Hence, a sustained political reform and reconciliation process may eventually curb that rise.

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29 Lyall and I. Wilson.

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

31 Kilcullen.

32 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.

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

34 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.

35 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/2pORh74>

36 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

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