Introducing Re-Generated Security Forces in Yemen:
The Crisis of the Hybrid Model in Fractured Arab States

Eleonora Ardemagni

The Iranian Studies Unit

Introducing Re-Generated Security Forces in Yemen: The Crisis of the Hybrid Model in Fractured Arab States

Eleonora Ardemagni

Eleonora Ardemagni is a Senior Associate Research Fellow at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies, MENA Centre. She is also a Teaching Assistant at the Catholic University of Milan, an Adjunct Professor at ASERI (Graduate School of Economics and International Relations, Milan), and a Former Gulf Analyst for the NATO Defense College Foundation (2015-2020). She is the author of *The Houthis: Adaptable Players in Yemen's Multiple Geographies* (CRiSSMA-Catholic University, 2019) and co-editor of *From Warlords to Statelords: Armed Groups and Power Trajectories in Libya and Yemen* (Ledizioni-LediPublishing, 2022).

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction: The Problem with Hybridity

This paper argues that the hybrid model is no longer sufficient to frame and understand the reality of security actors in fractured Arab states.[1] In countries such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya, the army's composition has profoundly changed since the 2011 uprisings, as state institutions underwent legitimacy crises, violent contestations, and multidimensional collapses. In this framework, politicized armies have fragmented along different loyalties because of shifting political-military balances. This has resulted in an ongoing disordered restructuring process that involves the gradual replacement by governments of a significant part of the army's soldiers and officers with fighters integrated from armed groups. For this reason, the hybrid lens of analysis risks being inapplicable, since in these countries "armies" and "militias" no longer appear as two distinct poles of an imaginary security continuum.

Due to integration, most of the current security actors in fractured Arab states have become something more, and different from the sum of two distinct segments: "armies" and "militias", undermining the explanatory effectiveness of hybridity. The categories applied from 2010 - 2020 are increasingly inaccurate. Filling a theoretical and analytical gap, this paper introduces the concept of "re-generated security forces" to make sense of the new security forces in fractured Arab states, shedding light on their governance-oriented function. There is no academic consensus on how hybrid security actors can be defined, even though some shared parameters provide us a rough definition. Since 2011, security hybridization has marked most of the dynamics occurring in countries like Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Libya, as many armed groups have been legalized or institutionalized as part of the regular defence sector, producing hybridity between formal armies and armed groups.

However, another phenomenon can also be observed in fractured Arab states, especially in countries ravaged by prolonged conflicts such as Yemen, Syria, and Libya: armed groups and/or fighters becoming gradually integrated into what remains of regular armies. This alters previous balances within regular armies whose composition significantly differs today, according to local and regional identities and religious affiliations, from the pre-2011 status quo. Therefore, analysing these security actors through the hybridization lens overlooks the fact that armies now employ a significant number of former armed groups or fighters. This new dynamic challenges the hybridization concept that, to be theoretically effective, requires two distinct realities to meet and merge. Therefore, the emergence of a new phenomenon implies the need for an updated lens of analysis to frame and understand security landscapes which are shaped by the growing governance role of forces blending segments of armies and of militias: re-generated security forces. Re-generation does not refer to the "quality" of these forces, but to the "outcome of an ongoing process". In fact, stratified hybridization, the frequent replacement of soldiers with fighters within the armies, and the *de facto* governance of military groups in contexts of protracted wars (Yemen, Libya, and Syria) have produced new military forces with respect to both pre-2011 military actors and the hybrid umbrellas that formed immediately after the uprisings.

---

1   Regarding the "hybrid model", this paper builds on the "hybrid" framing provided and then developed by Boege *et al.* who "...use the term "hybrid" to characterize these political orders because: it is broad enough to encompass a variety of non-state forms of order and governance on the customary side (from neo-)patrimonial to acephalous)": Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, "On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of 'Fragility,'" *Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management*, January 1, 2008, https://bit.ly/48OnK0g.

As the armies' structural collapse after 2011 paved the way for security hybridization, prolonged conflicts have allowed re-generated military forces to take shape, building territorial control on the ground. Yemen epitomizes the trajectory of the post-2011 security landscape, as well as of its actors. Since the anti-government uprising, the army fractured due to the protests against Ali Abdullah Saleh's presidency, with many units and officers – alongside the overwhelming part of the Republican Guard – siding with the Houthis against the internationally recognized government since late 2014. After the Houthi coup in Sanaa in early 2015, several armed groups established to fight the Houthis' military advancement towards South were later legalized as part of the regular security sector (i.e., the Security Belt Forces under the Ministry of Interior in 2016), while maintaining relevant autonomy on the ground (*hybridization*). At the same time, the regular army has formally placed other armed groups (such as the Hadhrami Elite Forces in 2016) under its command, while also integrating into the army's ranks fighters from the Southern Resistance who fought the Houthis since 2015 (*integration*).

The Yemen case raises two issues. First, security hybridization does not necessarily produce real integration. Legalized armed groups tend to continue acting autonomously despite being formally part of the state's chain of command. Second, hybridization and integration are not necessarily "in sequence" phenomena, since they can develop in parallel as co-present dynamics, with integration tending to increase in number and frequency as the conflict goes on. Aiming to push forward the academic and think tank debate on non-state hybrid actors, the paper addresses the following questions: Why is hybridity no longer effective in framing and understanding current security players in fractured Arab states? Given this gap, what is the most effective concept instead to frame and understand current security players?

This paper addresses the post-2011 evolution of hybrid security actors in fractured Arab states, with Yemen as a case study, shedding light on the effectiveness and the crisis of hybridity as a pattern of analysis. It begins by problematizing the limits of hybridity in explaining the current scenario, reflecting on the post-2011 academic and think tank debate around hybrid actors and the lack of a coherent definition to frame them. The trajectory of security actors in Yemen emphasizes the security landscapes' evolution in fractured Arab states. Hybridization and integration can rise in parallel, however, as the conflict persists, integration in the army's ranks significantly alters the physiognomy of the army in comparison to pre-2011 balances, adding a distinct variable to security hybridization. It studies the integration variable regardless of the outcome of the integration process. The majority of formally integrated armed groups and fighters continue to act autonomously on the ground despite integration. In fact, integration is a broad concept which can imply a variety of policy tools, goals, and expectations. The integration factor alters the original army's composition, disempowering the hybridity's potential to explain the evolution of the security landscape. The concept of re-generated military forces explains instead the new reality in which governance-oriented forces control and "govern" portions of the territory.

Historical Perspective and the Terminology Issue: Defining post-2011 Hybrid Security Actors

The crises that erupted in many Arab states since the 2011 uprisings revealed a loss of government capacity and the legitimacy of rulers vis-à-vis impoverished and often disenfranchised citizens. This has widely resulted in peripheral insurgencies against the state central power, popular uprisings, and civil wars. In fractured Arab states, the institutional crisis continues to be mirrored by the fragmentation of security sectors, lacking a monopoly over violence and seeing the proliferation of bottom-up armed groups. In many Arab states, defence structures are no longer state-centred or built upon the armies. Conversely, security hybridization became widespread since 2011 between segments of the armies and militias. Security hybridization takes different shapes in each country, according to power relations and state resilience, including through: coexistence (i.e., the Lebanese Armed Forces and Hezbollah in Lebanon), cooperation (i.e., the National Defence Forces and the Syrian Arab Army in Syria; the Hashd Al Shaabi and the Iraqi Army in Iraq), and merging (i.e., the bulk of the Republican Guard and the Houthis in Yemen). Against this backdrop, the hybrid model, once proposed only in critical security studies, has gradually been adopted – notwithstanding criticism – due to its effectiveness in explaining the deep transformation in the security sectors of fractured Arab states.

Different from security hybridization as a phenomenon, hybrid security actors as objects of study are difficult to define and no coherent, shared definition yet exists. On this topic, think tanks have pushed the conversation on hybrid security actors forward,[2] while academia has predominantly focused on hybrid warfare, conflict, authority, security governance and order.[3] This is likely related to think tank interests in understanding emerging realities on the ground, thus pushing analysts to engage in the "definition issue" to suggest policies useful to deal with, or to counter, hybrid security actors. As Rauta notes "there has been a disproportionate focus on what hybrid war supposedly combines across battlespaces, at the expense of who is combined and how this combination takes place".[4] But "the actor problem in hybrid warfare research," according to Rauta, can be traced also in the domain of hybridity which studies the actors. Hybrid security actors, as non-state actors,[5] contain too

---

2   See: Eleonora Ardemagni and Yezid Sayigh, eds., "Hybridizing Security: Armies and Militias in Fractured Arab States," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies-Carnegie Middle East Centre*, Dossier, October 30, 2018, https://bit.ly/4ccG9a0; Matteo Colombo, Erwin van Veen, and Nancy Ezzeddine, "Coercive Organisations, War and State Development in the Levant," *Clingendael*, March 29, 2022, https://bit.ly/43sfaDL; Thanassis Cambanis et al., "Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East," *The Century Foundation*, November 12, 2019, https://bit.ly/3Pdc0gU.

3   For instance, hybrid security actors in hybrid security orders (Boege et al., "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States"), which proliferate in contexts of contested state legitimacy, limited statehood, and hierarchy (Niagale Bagayoko, Eboe Hutchful, and Robin Luckham, " Hybrid Security Governance in Africa: Rethinking the Foundations of Security, Justice and Legitimate Public Authority," *Conflict, Security & Development*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (2016); Abel Polese and Ruth Hanau Santini, "Limited Statehood and its Security Implications on the Fragmentation Political Order in the Middle East and North Africa," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 29, (2018); Raymond Hinnebusch, "From Westphalian Failure to Heterarchic Governance in MENA: The Case of Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 29, (2018); Jack Donnelly, "The Heterarchic Structure of Twenty-First-Century International Governance," *The Korean Journal of International Studies*, Nos. 14-1, (April 2016).

4   Vladimir Rauta, "Towards a Typology of Non-State Actors in 'Hybrid Warfare': Proxy, Auxiliary, Surrogate and Affiliated Forces," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 6, (2020), pp. 868 - 887.

5   Proxies, mercenaries, militias (pro-government or not), or insurgents, see Irene Costantini and Federico Donelli, "Sponsor-Proxy Dynamics Between Decentered Multipolarity and Non-state Actors: Evidence From the MENA Region," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, (2021).

many different non-state typologies. Cambanis et al. propose the most comprehensive and nuanced definition of hybrid actors:

> "The hybrid actor, a type of armed group that sometimes operates in concert with the state and sometimes competes with it. Hybrid actors depend on state sponsorship and benefit from the tools and prerogatives of state power but at the same time enjoy the flexibility that comes with not being the state. Hybrid actors seek to harness and control some but not all spheres of the state's authority. Those that survive over many years tend to penetrate the state and carve out official fiefdoms within its architecture. They engage in war, diplomacy, politics, and propaganda. They build and maintain constituencies, providing not just security but also services and ideological guidance. Though almost all hybrid actors have some relationship with an external patron, they are more than mere proxies, and have some latitude to make their own policies and decisions".[6]

Many observers have used sub-categorizations of the different roles that hybrid security actors can play. These have focused on their opposition to the status quo ("rebels" or "insurgents"), their profit-oriented goals and bourgeoning role because of the war ("warlords"), their support to government forces ("pro-government militias", or "auxiliaries"), and their client relationship with respect to a foreign patron ("proxies"). Hybrid security actors have been often analysed through the lens of rebel governance, highlighting their political nature beyond the simple opposition to the institutional status quo, and how rebels interact with local authorities, especially when they engage in governance.[7] Warlords often do not express political intents, although Giustozzi states that they have a "neopatrimonialist" connotation.[8] However, warlords can be categorized as hybrid security actors when they reveal a political, and in some cases, a national intent. In post-2011 Yemen and Libya, warlords are not only driven by profit, but they are involved in local governance, gradually gaining some sort of political legitimacy.[9] Pro-government militias or auxiliaries are also defined as hybrid armed actors, "because they blend formal and informal authority and power bases", or alternatively they are labelled as "para-statal, para-institutional or State-parallel forces".[10] Studies

---

6   Cambanis et al., "Hybrid Actors," pp. 10 - 11.

7   On the trajectory of rebel co-governance arrangements at the local level leading to the militarization of local authority see: Benedetta Berti, "From Cooperation to Competition: Localization, Militarization and Rebel Co-Governance Arrangements in Syria," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 46, No. 2, (2020). "Mediated stateness" or "mediated state" refers to the cooperation between rebels, other armed groups, and the state with which they co-exist: this is a case of multi-layered governance (Nelson Kasfir, Georg Frerks, and Niels Terpstra, "Introduction: Armed Groups and Multi-layered Governance," Civil Law, Vol. 19, No. 3, (2017), p. 9). Rebel governance can also display political transformative goals as "many takes on rebel governance have lost sight of the deeply political nature of rebel governance itself and its contexts, which refers to the fundamental contestation of the political status quo involved in staging a rebellion, and the far-reaching and transformative goals of some rebel groups" (Hanna Pfeifer and Regina Schwab, "Re-examining the State/Non-State Binary in the Study of (Civil) War," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 25, No. 2-3, (2023), p. 3). On the governance issue, see Marta Furlan, "Understanding Governance by Insurgent Non-State Actors: A Multi-Dimensional Typology," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 22, No. 4, (2020).

8   However, the warlord is "a non-state political-military actor who has military legitimacy but little or no political legitimacy, so he "lacks interest in changing the nature of the state" (Antonio Giustozzi, "The Debate on Warlordism: The Importance of Military Legitimacy," *Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Social Sciences*, Discussion Paper no. 13, October 2005, https://bit.ly/4agp7X3.

9   See Eleonora Ardemagni and Federica Saini Fasanotti, 2022. "From Warlords to Statelords: Armed Groups and Power Trajectories in Libya and Yemen," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, 2022. "The forces of a warlord…transform into a hybrid actor when the group begins to express a more national mandate and interest in the state. Prior to this point, the warlord's group provides services and protection, including protecting his community from the state" (Cambanis et al., "Hybrid Actors", p. 24).

10   Adam Day, ed., "Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions," *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, April 14, 2020, https://bit.ly/3x2PLUH. See also Ariel I. Ahram, "Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (2015); Christoph Steinert, Janina Steinert, and Sabine Carey, "Spoilers of Peace," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 56, No. 4, (October 2018). Moreover, it is possible to identify a "direct link between 'coup-proofing', dependence on irregular auxiliaries in civil war, and the erosion of the state's integrity" (Geraint Hughes, "Militias in Internal Warfare: From the Colonial Era to the Contemporary Middle East," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (2015).

on auxiliaries have focused on Syria, since these forces played a crucial role in the survival of Bashar Al-Assad's regime. Proxies or non-state clients do not have to be understood as monolithic groups depending on external orders. However, especially in the composite Iranian armed constellation, proxies rather embody nuanced and flexible approaches to patronage relations, depending on the group's genealogy and agenda.[11] Moreover, state sponsorship of proxies follows different paths. It can be "a formal, planned element of security policy," or the proxy-client relationship emerges "informally in response to shifting local conditions, often in an ad hoc manner".[12] From a theoretical perspective, scholarship on militias, pro-government forces, and proxies tends to be state-centred, while the scholarship on hybrid security actors is more community-oriented as it portrays security from the perspective of recipients and communities.

Introducing Re-Generated Security Forces: The Integration Factor

As hybridity deepens due to protracted civil wars, the boundary between "state" and "non-state" actors blurs, making it harder to extricate "formal" and "informal" security players. Pfeifer and Schwab note that in the context of civil wars, the term hybridity reproduces "the assumption of the neat separability between the 'state' and 'nonstate' realms," which is instead difficult to identify at an empirical level.[13] In countries like Yemen, Syria, and Libya, the armies no longer have the confessional, local-regional, or tribal compositions they presented before 2011, due to the armies' structural collapse resulting from institutional crisis, civil and prolonged war, and the consolidation of multiple power centres. In these countries, some armed groups and/or fighters were directly integrated into the army to fill the manpower gaps generated by the uprisings and the defence sector collapse. As a result, integration into the army differs from legalization into the armed forces, producing a security dynamic which goes beyond hybridity, intended here as armed groups and/or fighters' legalization as part of the armed forces. Integration extends security hybridization since it alters one of the poles of the defence structure, i.e. the "army" and "militias".

It should be also noted that military integration, as well as hybrid security actors, do not have a univocal meaning, presenting a "catch all phrase" which describe "a wide array of policies" that often operate "more than an economic mechanism rather than a security mechanism".[14] Military integration is "the strategy of integrating former rebels into a new national army".[15] However, this can imply a variety of policy tools, goals, and expectations. For instance, military integration occurs when "individuals are brought into the new military in positions similar to the ones they occupied

11   See Peter Bergen, Candace Rondeaux, Daniel Rothenberg, and David Sterman, eds., *Understanding the New Proxy Wars: Battlegrounds and Strategies Reshaping the Greater Middle East* (Oxford University Press, 2022); Ahram, "Proxy Warriors". For instance, some authors identify four models of client-state relations with Iran: The targeters, the deterrers, the stabilizers, and the influencers. See on this Ariane Tabatabai, Jeffrey Martini, and Becca Wasser, "The Iran Threat Network (ITN). Four Models of Iran's Nonstate Client Partnerships," *RAND Corporation*, April 14, 2021, https://bit.ly/3VoCJuO. Also, Abdolrasool Divsallar and Hamidreza Azizi, "Towards a Non-Western Model of Security Assistance: How Iran Assists Militaries," *Mediterranean Politics*, (2023).

12   Bergen et al., eds., *Understanding the New Proxy Wars*.

13   Hanna Pfeifer and Regina Schwab, "Re-examining the State/Non-State Binary in the Study of (Civil) War," *Civil Wars*, Vol. 25, No. 2-3, (2023), p. 435.

14   Katherine Glassmyer and Nicholas Sambanis, "Rebel-Military Integration and Civil War Termination," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (2008), p. 381.

15   Katherine Glassmyer and Nicholas Sambanis, "Rebel-Military Integration and Civil War Termination," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 45, No. 3, (2008), pp. 365-384, cit. p. 365.

in the prior organization"[16]; however, the establishment of a new army in order to pursue military integration does not necessarily imply the disbandment of the former military formations and the creation of a completely new army.[17] This emphasizes the extent of the policy nuances the integration concept can include.

Consequently, integration can refer to security landscapes which are very different from another, even though the achieved level of *real* integration of armed groups and/or fighters into the armies (i.e., respect of the chain of command; coherence, and *esprit de corps*), does not affect the use of integration as a concept. In pre-2011 Syria, the army's manpower was mostly Sunni with the notable exception of minorities and Alawi special corps and officers. Since 2011, the government has gradually re-staffed the army with former Shia fighters and groups, also on a transnational base.

In Syria, the progressive shift from a hybridization approach built through legalization to an integration model is quite clear. For instance, the Fifth Corps, a volunteer-based force under the Ministry of Defence, was established in 2017 at the national level, with legal status, expanding and replacing the Latakia-based Fourth Corps created in 2016, to be deployed alongside army units and other foreign-supported groups (hybridization). In 2018, President Bashar Al Assad dismantled the National Defence Forces (NDF), reorganizing most of its forces as part of the Russian-backed Fourth (Latakia) and then Fifth (National) Corps. This was mainly due to the strategic disagreements between Russians and Iranians in Syria on how to deal with militias.

In 2017, the Iran-backed Local Defence Forces were officially considered part of the Syrian Arab army (integration), as well as the foreign-dominated (non-Syrian) Iran-backed militia of al-Abbas brigade (integrated into the Republican Guard, mainly comprising Iraqi Shia), and the Iran-backed Afghani and Pakistani fighters who were members of the Fatemiyoun and Zainabiyoun Brigades.[18] In Libya, the hybridization paradigm is reversed. In fact, after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, militias exploited their state affiliation to co-opt segments of the formal security apparatus into their ranks in the west and south of the country. In the east of Libya, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), the "would-be national army," comprises formal units with varied tribal composition and auxiliary local forces. In such a security landscape "not only did armed groups seek to opportunistically affiliate themselves with the state, they also exacerbated hybridity by infiltrating the more formal pre-revolutionary security apparatuses that had remained in place".[19] Paradoxically, this highlights that "state-sponsored 'integration processes' institutionally weakened the country's central authority".[20]

---

16   Roy Licklider, ed., *New Armies from Old: Merging Competing Military Forces after Civil Wars* (Georgetown University Press, 2014), p. 3.

17   See Anja Melin, Anja. "Military Integration of Former Enemies. Do Previous Identities Matter for the Creation of a New 'We'?," (Master's Thesis, Uppsala University, 2016), https://bit.ly/3PkSAqw.

18   Hamidreza Azizi, "Integration of Iran-Backed Armed Groups into the Iraqi and Syrian Armed Forces: Implications for Stability in Iraq and Syria," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 33, No. 3, (2022), pp. 499-527

19   Emadeddin Badi, "Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment," *DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance*, November 23, 2020, p. 15, https://bit.ly/3PgLDHe.

20   Emadeddin Badi, "Exploring Armed Groups in Libya: Perspectives on SSR in a Hybrid Environment," *DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance*, November 23, 2020, p. 15, https://bit.ly/3PgLDHe.

Examples of integration can also be found in Libya. This is the case for the Saiqa, or Thunderbolt Special Forces, established in 1970 in Benghazi under the Gaddafi regime. The Saiqa survived the 2011 revolution. Since 2013, civilians and irregular fighters have been invited to join the special forces due to the corps' weakened position given shifting political balances and assassinations. "An estimated 800 individuals joined the ranks of the 300 professionally trained individuals who remained on duty after the fall of the Gadaffi regime".[21] The Petroleum Facilities Guard, a Gaddafi-era security structure tasked to secure oil fields and installations, has also enlisted revolutionaries who were seeking salary since 2011.[22] Given this shifting background, the hybrid model based on security hybridization between "armies" and "militias" reveals some limitations.

Some authors are refocusing the parameter of study from hybridity in military forces to the nature of the state, seeking to bridge the narrow gap between the formality and the informality of security actors. For instance, in the case of Iraq, analyst Renad Mansour develops a "network of power" approach to overcome the "hybridity compromise," which mistakenly separates the state from the society. Instead, Mansour reflects on the "nodal connections" between state and society that allow the debate on the formality and informality of military agents to go further, tracing power connections "regardless of where they [groups] sit".[23] Despite the significant contribution, the "network of power" approach does not address, nor define, the current reality of security actors in fractured Arab states, choosing to investigate instead how power is organized and handled in the context of the Iraqi hybrid landscape.

In the context of looming post-hybridity, a fresh perspective, and vocabulary, is needed to frame and understand current military forces in fractured Arab states. These forces differ both from pre-2011 military actors, as well as from the hybrid umbrellas that formed immediately after the 2011 uprisings. These new formations are re-generated military forces since regular armies have integrated a consistent number of armed groups/fighters in their ranks, undergoing a deep transformation.[24] Regeneration does not refer here to "quality", but only to the "outcome of an ongoing process" in which integration – although only formal and ineffective – deeply affects security balances adding, or developing in parallel, to hybridization. At the same time, regular armies continue to fight and "govern" alongside institutionalized militias. Re-generated military forces display five recurrent features, which are not necessarily present together but often combine in the same context:

1. Presence of multiple and competing power centres: They lack an agreed and unified chain of command, opting instead for *ad hoc* schemes depending on the battlefield;

---

21   Ibid., p. 27.

22   Ibid., p. 35.

23   Renad Mansour, "Networks of Power: The Popular Mobilization Forces and the State in Iraq", *Chatham House*, February 25, 2021, https://bit.ly/3VcSEMU.

24   Eleonora Ardemagni, "Beyond Hybridity: Making Sense of Re-Generated Military Forces," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*, May 28, 2021, https://bit.ly/3wMLa96.

2. De-structured and localized organization: They blend hierarchical structure typical of the armies with the decentralized and horizontal shape of bottom-up militias. These mixed organizations are highly dependent on local balances and identities, with an emphasis on mobilization;

3. Combination of military capabilities with militarized police tasks: They manage coercion and patrolling and are better equipped – and motivated – to counter internal threats rather than external challenges, with police forces also highly-fragmented and infiltrated by militias;

4. Governance-oriented with a strong role in welfare provision: They are governance-oriented and actively engaged in service delivery, combining military and economic-social tasks across the same territory;

5. High external influence and penetration by foreign state powers: They are often supported by external state actors vying for influence. This dynamic enhances competing Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Security Sector Assistance (SSA) projects, feeding internal instability.

6. Some of these features reveal that re-generated military forces were able to capitalize on sovereignty crises in fractured Arab states. In many cases, they have been able to not only seize but also hold on to portions of the territory, building a multifaceted power (i.e., economic, social welfare, education, religious), starting from military power. This underlines the extent to which these forces are no longer simply military players but have become agents of governance at the local level.

The Evolution of Hybrid Security Actors Towards Re-generation: The Case of Yemen

Yemen's security landscape effectively demonstrates how the co-presence of hybridization and integration dynamics have gradually reshaped security actors in the country since the 2011 uprising and the 2015 civil war. This has marked security actors' evolution from "hybridity" to "re-generation". In Yemen, the 2015 civil war was rooted in decades of poor government, pervasive corruption, and regional inequalities. Phillips stresses that Yemen is a country in permanent crisis.[25] The unification between the North (former Yemen's Arab Republic, YAR) and the South (Peoples' Democratic Republic of Southern Yemen, PDRY) in 1990 was widely perceived by Southerners as some sort of annexation by Saleh's northern-driven regime, with Southern regions systematically sidelined by the redistribution of oil revenues, welfare, and public sector jobs. This resulted in a civil war in 1994 which ended with the strengthening of Saleh's authoritarian presidency, and then with a series of insurgencies in the peripheries against the Sanaa-based government and its system of power (the "Saada wars" fought by the Houthis against Sanaa, 2004-2010; the peaceful protests of former PDRY's military veterans in 2007, which led to the foundation of Al Hiraak Al Janubi). As socio-economic inequalities widened

---

25 Sarah Phillips, *Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

and oil revenues declined, Saleh's regime was no longer able to feed the large tribal-commercial-military complex[26] supporting Sanaa's neo-patrimonial[27] regime.

At the same time, the Arab uprisings, which began in Tunisia during late 2010, provided the ideational background to push the Yemeni youth to streets, asking for bread and dignity. However, the leaderless and peaceful Yemeni uprising was instrumentally used by military factions – often mirroring party politics – to alter consolidated political balances. This provoked the first fracturing of the Yemeni army. General Ali Mohsin Al Ahmar, the commander of the First Military Division of the army and long-time Saleh's ally with strong influence on the Islah party, sided with protesters against the repression operated by the Republican Guard. But the uprising did not turn into a revolution. It resulted in a crisis *in* the Yemeni system, not in a crisis *of* the system.

Given the popular pressure and, most of all, the political-military rupture within the ruling elite, Saudi Arabia drafted a Gulf Cooperation Council agreement aimed to support a peaceful, and guided, institutional transition in Yemen. The agreement established a power-sharing government, an interim presidency for Saleh's vice president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, and a two-year institutional transition tasked with constitutional reform through the National Dialogue Conference (2013-2014). But the transition quickly derailed. Although as part of the transitional process, the Houthis and Saleh's power bloc informally forged an alliance of convenience against the power-sharing government, the Houthis rejected the outcome of the federal reform. Saleh's network disagreed with the security sector reform implemented by Hadi to curb the former president's persisting loyalties in the armed forces. This convergence of interests among former enemies led to the Houthis' sit-ins in Sanaa (Summer 2014) to exploit the protest against subsidy cuts by the government that was negotiating a financial loan with the International Monetary Fund; the establishment of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement PNPA (September 2014) to form a government of national unity led by technocrats; and finally the Houthis' coup of January 2015, with the establishment of a Revolutionary Committee and the promulgation of a Constitutional Declaration replacing the constitution.

The second fracturing of the Yemeni army occurred before the coup, when the military bloc still loyal to Saleh supported, or at least did not oppose, the Houthis' power grab, thus failing to protect recognized state institutions. Against this backdrop, Saudi Arabia organized in March 2015 a ten-country Arab military intervention in Yemen, aimed to restore the internationally recognized government in Sanaa and to push the Houthis back to their Saada lands in the upper north. Three simplistic and short-sighted readings on the Yemen War need be confuted. First, the conflict in Yemen began as an internal war, and the regional layer is only a consequence: the war was driven by domestic drivers despite also having a regional dimension, due to the Saudi and the Emirati interventions as well as the Iranian military support for the Houthis. Second, the Yemen War is a political and tribal dispute

---

26   Adam Seitz, Adam. 2017. "The Tribal-Military-Commercial Complex and Challenges to Security Sector Reform in Yemen," in *Addressing Security Sector Reform in Yemen: Challenges and Opportunities for Intervention During and Post-Conflict*, Marie-Christine Heinze ed. (CARPO-Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Report, December 2017), pp. 14 - 21.

27   Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

for power, resources, and revenues, not a sectarian conflict. In contemporary Yemen, alliance- and war-making are predominantly driven by political and pragmatic reasons, not by ideological and sectarian beliefs. Third, this is not a binary war between Houthi and government forces. The anti-Houthi camp has been extremely fragmented since the beginning, with a myriad of armed groups and political movements fighting together against the Houthis but pursuing different and often conflicting agendas regarding the political future of Yemen's institutions. Since 2015, the stalemate and the failure of Saudi military goals in the country have contributed to protracting the conflict, further eroding state sovereignty. This scenario has exacerbated the territorial fragmentation process, with micro-powers based on military actors consolidating on the ground.

Yemen's Security Actors Before 2011: The Army at the Centre of Hybrid Security Governance

In contemporary Yemen, the defence structure has always been hybrid. This has paradoxically remained stable through the decades, despite regime changes, changes in tribal alliances, the 1990 unification, and the fracturing of Yemen's army in 2011 and 2015. More broadly, Yemen's security sector has never been national, due to the chronic lack of a state monopoly on power, and the unrestrained power of tribal militias. Furthermore, when Saleh was in charge as president, the army was a collection of tribal loyalties, with no single chain of command and often dual loyalties given that regular soldiers not only answered to army's commanders but also to their tribal chiefs. Saleh's neo-patrimonial army was a microcosm of Yemen's authoritarian system marked by corruption and cronyism. The army represented a vector of co-optation and tribal patronage for the president, as well as a source of political resilience and public employment.[28] While this hybrid structure has persisted across the decades, the pattern of security governance has changed. Since 2011, this has shifted from an "army-centred" model to composite military alliances based on militias.[29] The security governance pattern was "army-centred" since the army was the backbone of security governance, with hybrid actors playing a supporting role. For instance, during the "Saada wars" (2004-2010) and especially since the Fourth Saada war (2007-2008), Saleh's army was assisted by tribal volunteers and Salafi tribal militias in the fight against the Houthis. In June 2012, interim president Hadi deployed the army and Republican Guard's units alongside the purpose-built popular committees in Abyan — which rallied local volunteers and fighters — to dismantle Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's proto-emirates, established in Jaar and Zinjibar (Abyan governorate).

"Patchwork Security": The Post-2011 Proliferation of Hybrid Security Actors and the "Militia-Centred" Pattern of Governance

The 2015 conflict triggered the proliferation of armed groups, in many cases hybrid security actors, thus strengthening the existing hybrid nature of Yemen's defence sector. Since 2011 and 2015,

---

28   Eleonora Ardemagni, "Yemen's Defense Structure: Hybridity and Patronage After the State," *Journal of Arabian Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (2020), p. 7.

29   Ibid.

militias have become crucial to the formation of composite military alliances, also rallying segments of regular forces. At this point, the army is no longer at the centre of the defence structure, and militias acquire a legal status through formal affiliation under the army or the ministry of interior. In such a context, bottom-up and top-down militias multiply, deepening the security hybridization phenomenon. Bottom-up militias take shape from the battlefield experience, or they are groups built from the ashes of previous resistance movements or armed groups, usually for local security purposes. In Yemen, this is for instance the case of the Security Belt Forces (SBF), established since mid-2015 by the United Arab Emirates, recruiting from the Southern Resistance who fought against the Houthis in the areas of Aden, Lahj, Al Dhale, and Abyan. The SBF were decisive in pushing back the Houthis' military penetration in the South, alongside loose units of the remaining Yemeni army, plus the support of Sudanese forces.[30] The Emirati-backed SBF, mostly rallying Southern secessionists with Salafi persuasions, tribal fighters, and former PDRY's soldiers and sympathizers, were later institutionalized in 2016 through presidential decree under the Ministry of Interior, and in 2019 became formally affiliated to the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which had joined the recognized government. Conversely, the role of state institutions is decisive for the establishment of top-down militias, whose primary task is the protection of institutional leaders and buildings.

These groups have little, if any, attachment to the territories and local dynamics. For instance, interim president Hadi established the Presidential Protection Brigades (PPB) in 2012. These were state-sponsored militias answering directly to the presidency and tasked to protect institutional buildings, built also with the intent of providing a military wing to the president. The PPB symbolically included three brigades of the Republican Guard (once Saleh's fiefdom), and one brigade from the First Armoured Division of the Army (technically disbanded, formerly guided by General Ali Mohsin Al Ahmar). Also, in the "irregular" Houthi faction an example of security hybridization can be identified. In fact, loyalists of former president Saleh, in the army and in a large segment of the Republican Guard (led by Saleh's son Ahmed Ali till 2013), have coalesced with the Houthis since late 2014 against the recognized government.

The Houthi-Saleh insurgent faction, an alliance of convenience with notable military implications, underwent a "cooperative consolidation" process at first (mid-2013-2016), in which the Houthis grew "consensually through alliance formation and mergers," then shifting towards a "coercive consolidation" (since 2017), in which the Houthis "violently eliminating rivals or forcing them to submit to their authority," killing Ali Abdullah Saleh at last.[31] The pivotal role of militias highlights how Yemen's security governance has been characterized since 2011 by "patchwork security". This means the Yemeni state opts for "locally-based security agreements and not for overall, national frameworks". In this case, competing security providers multiply on the territory, as well as the cases of coexistence/cooperation between armies and armed non-state actors, thus leaving room for

---

30   Sudanese forces both from the army and from the paramilitary group of the Rapid Support Forces.

31   Mohammed H. Hafez, Michael Gabbay, and Emily Kalah Gade, 2021. "Consolidation of Nonstate Armed Actors in Fragmented Conflicts: Introducing an Emerging Research Program," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, p. 2.

hybrid security experiences of combat and, later, governance. "This kind of security governance is marked by horizontal, rather than vertical power relations: hierarchies are shaped at a local level, since the central state is not only unable to provide security on the whole territory, but it is also contested and adopts 'irregular faces' to survive," boosting the legalization of bottom-up militias or crafting "from above" its loyalist military forces.[32]

Beyond Hybridity: Re-Generated Security Actors and the Consolidation of Militiadoms

Since 2015, another trend has gradually emerged, alongside hybridity, in Yemen's security sector: the replacement of units and soldiers of the army with new groups and fighters. These have been integrated in the ranks due to the army's collapse, as a result of shifting political and military loyalties. As previously stated, integration can imply a variety of policy tools, goals and expectations.[33] However, as the Yemeni case highlights, the presence of integrated armed groups and fighters in the army ranks is sufficient to undermine hybridity's theoretical effectiveness in framing current security landscapes in fractured Arab states. In mid-2015, Yemen's army announced the integration of former Southern Resistance's fighters and officers, mostly from the Aden province, via presidential decrees (almost 5000 fighters according to media reports).[34] This occurred after the Southern Resistance had forced the Houthis to roll back from Southern territories, also saving the provisional capital Aden. The integration process was presented by media using words such as recruitment, assimilation, and merging.[35] The army's "re-generated" units, combining regular soldiers and newly integrated militants, were deployed in the areas in which military balances were mostly affected by the Houthi coup, which generated the second fracturing of Yemen's army in early 2015. These included "most of the southern provinces and a number of northern provinces under President Hadi's authority, such as Midi, Harad in Hajjah province, most of Taiz province, the Naham region in Sanaa, and most of the districts of Marib and al-Jawf".[36]

The integration dynamic and its implications have been tangible in Marib and Shabwa governorates, as well as in Taiz. The Marib governorate represents the bulk of what remains of the Yemeni army; however, as of 2021, according to the Defence Minister Lieutenant General Muhammad Al-Maqdashi, "the brigades of the Third Region [Marib and Shabwa] and other areas existed, but it was emptied of manpower, so we had to reinforce some units with elements of the popular resistance in the

---

32 Eleonora Ardemagni, "Patchwork Security: The New Face of Yemen's Hybridity," *Italian Institute for International Political Studies-Carnegie Middle East Centre*, Dossier, October 30, 2018, in Ardemagni and Sayigh, eds., "Hybridizing Security," https://tinyurl.com/ytwueufr.

33 In some cases, the existence of the same integration process is difficult to assess, as involved parties support opposite versions. This is for instance the case of the STC and the Yemeni government after the 2019 Riyadh Agreement: "The Council stated that, in 2021, all its military and security forces had been integrated into the Government forces; the Government of Yemen denies this". See "UN Panel of Experts on Yemen 2022," United Nations Security Council, January 26, 2022, p. 15, https://bit.ly/3Tke87M.

34 "Yemen's Army Recruits Almost 5000 Southern Fighters: Officer," *Middle East Eye*, August 28, 2015, https://bit.ly/3TzMzsD; "Yemen to Merge Resistance Fighters with Army," *Arab News*, July 30, 2015, https://bit.ly/3x0U56S.

35 Ibid.

36 Ali Al-Dahab, "Warring Parties: Formations and Dynamics," AlJazeera Centre for Studies, June 30, 2016, https://bit.ly/3TwnP4t.

southern governorates, Marib and Al-Jawf, after undergoing training".[37] The Taiz Military Axis has also incorporated, since 2017, a number of armed groups close to the Islah party. For instance, the Twenty-Second Brigade of the Taiz Military Axis has integrated four Islah-related armed groups. And the Al-Saalik Brigade became part of the 145th Brigade. The Seventeenth Brigade, which is another infantry brigade under the Taiz Military Axis, "is ultimately a hybrid, pulling in both career military forces and irregular forces mobilized after the start of the Houthi siege in Taiz".[38]

Almost a decade since the 2015 Yemen conflict broke out, the term "hybrid" does not grasp how the regular army, due to defections, losses, and protracted conflict, is now filled with a stratification of forces whose origins are far from those coming from standard recruitment and conscription. In other words, because of the processes of hybridization and integration, today Yemen's army resembles more an armed group-like force than a regular force. In Yemen, this is also due to the consolidation of military-based governance on the territory throughout the war, as fighters have gradually transformed into governance actors on the ground. "Militiadoms, a militarised variant of 'chiefdoms' and 'sheikhdoms' have come to play a key role in Yemen's security governance,"[39] emerging from the ruins of state institutions. Militiadoms are "geographically adjacent but disconnected micro-powers, often competing with one another, that have evolved from hybrid military structures".[40] Placed beyond hybridity, Yemen's militiadoms embody the governance side of re-generated security forces, as the majority of these fighting forces have also turned into governance players because of state authorities' power vacuum or their inability to provide territorial control on their own.

Militiadoms develop socio-economic informal networks which are connected to the competing Yemeni "states": the internationally recognized government and the *de facto* Houthi state. In Yemen's militiadoms, the main features of re-generated security forces can be identified. For instance, since power centres are multiple and competing, the STC-affiliated Security Belt Forces continue to act autonomously from the formal chain of command despite their legalization under the ministry of interior in 2016, and the STC's formal entrance into the recognized government as for the Riyadh Agreement in 2019. De-centralization is key to understand the militiadoms' roots. For instance, the Shabwani Elite Forces, group legalized under the army's authority since 2016 and now partially reconstituted in the Shabwa Defense Forces, recruit locals to provide security and fight locally, thus forging a direct connection with held territories. At the crossroads between military forces and militarized police, the Hadhrami Elite Forces, technically part of the army since 2016, have led the Emirati-backed ground offensive against AQAP in Mukalla (2016), but are also committed to

37 Naif Al-Qodasi Naif and Adnan Al Gabarni, "Parallel Militaries: Anatomy of the Armed Forces Fighting Yemen's War," *Al Masdar online*, January 3, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/2765fpj6.

38 Adam Baron and Raiman Al-Hamdani, "The "Proxy War" Prism on Yemen," *New America*, December 10, 2019, https://bit.ly/4chhW2i.

39 Eleonora Ardemagni, "Beyond Yemen's Militiadoms: Restarting from Local Agency," *The European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Conflict Brief Series, April 21, 2020, https://bit.ly/3vaQIK6.

40 Eleonora Ardemagni, "Beyond Yemen's Militiadoms: Restarting from Local Agency," *The European Union Institute for Security Studies*, Conflict Brief Series, April 21, 2020, https://bit.ly/3vaQIK6.

patrolling and public order activities in Hadhramawt's coastal area. A strong role in welfare provision is another feature marking the governance-oriented nature of these forces.

On the West coast, the Tareq Saleh's related militiadom displays a unique genealogy. Since 2019, the nephew of the former president leads a coalition of armed groups, the Joint Forces on the West Coast, comprising Saleh's National Resistance Forces (founded in late 2017), the Tihama Resistance, and the Giants Brigade (Al-Amaliqah). In 2021, Saleh established the political bureau of the National Resistance Forces, based in Mokha, the area in which he "provides local authorities with financial incentives, humanitarian and development assistance, and guarantees of their security".[41] Although fighting against the Houthis, the National Resistance Forces (NRF) have not been legalized under the regular security sector so far. However, both Tareq Saleh and the commander of the Giants Brigades Abdulrahman Al Muharrami (Abu Zaara) are members of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, the eight-member official body ruling the country since 2022. The NRF is a hybrid actor, nearly a third of its composition comes from the side of the former Republican Guard[42] – currently known as Guards of the Republic – that remained loyal to the recognized government, different from the majority of the Republican Guard's soldiers who coalesced with the Houthis. At the same time, the NRF has integrated several fighters from the Tihama Resistance, thus behaving like an army.

The Giants Brigades have shown mixed loyalties, since their military leadership when he was in charge acknowledged President Hadi's legitimacy, although acting autonomously from the recognized government. For instance, the Third Giants Brigade was also the Fourth Infantry Brigade under the army and in mid-2021 the First Tihama Brigade Commander was also named as the Commander of the Eighth Presidential Brigade, answering directly to president Hadi.[43] Finally, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia, have extensively provided Security Sector Assistance (SSA), and provided salaries, to a multitude of legalized groups such as the Security Belt Forces, the Shabwa Defence Forces, the Hadhrami Elite Forces, and the Al Amajid Brigade, thus dis-incentivizing their real integration into the armed forces.

Hybridization and Integration Reshape the Military in Yemen: Offering New Analytical Tools to Study Security Actors in Other Fractured Arab States

The case of Yemen highlights the trajectory of security actors in fractured Arab states. Despite the persistence of the hybrid defence structure, the "face" of security actors – as well as the patterns of security governance – in Yemen has consistently transformed due to the hybridization and integration processes. In Yemen, current forces differ both from pre-2011 military actors, as well as from the hybrid umbrellas that formed immediately after the 2011 uprisings. These new formations are re-generated

---

41 "UN Panel of Experts on Yemen 2022," p. 13.

42 Al-Qodasi and Al Gabarni, "Parallel militaries: Anatomy of the Armed Forces Fighting Yemen's War".

43 "UN Panel of Experts on Yemen 2022," p. 69.

military forces since regular armies have integrated a consistent number of armed groups/fighters in their ranks. The rise of military-based governance on the territory (the "militiadoms"), which builds upon these forces, shows some and even at times all the features of re-generated security forces, including: multiple and competing power centres; de-structured and localised organization; combination of military capabilities with militarized police tasks; governance-oriented attitude with a strong role in welfare provision; and high external influence and penetration by foreign state powers.

Yemen as well as other fractured Arab states, such as Syria and Libya, serve to demonstrate the crisis of hybridity and the need for new lenses of analysis. The armies' composition has deeply changed since the 2011 uprisings. State institutions underwent legitimacy crises, violent contestations, and multidimensional collapses. This has resulted in a disordered restructuring process which remains ongoing and results in the gradual replacement of a significant part of armies' soldiers and officers with fighters integrated from the armed groups by governments. The integration phenomenon has deeply altered the internal composition of the armies, whose politicization triggered fragmentation. Integration into the army differs from armed groups' legalization as part of the armed forces, thus producing a security dynamic which goes beyond hybridity, intended here as armed groups and/or fighters' legalization as part of the armed forces. Hybridization and integration can rise in parallel as co-present dynamics, however, as the conflict goes on, integration in army's ranks significantly alters the physiognomy of the army with respect to pre-war balances, adding a distinct variable to security hybridization. This disempowers the hybridity's suitability to explain the evolution of the security landscape, which proved decisive in post-2011.

Therefore, the case of Yemen shows that the hybrid model is no longer sufficient to frame and understand the reality of security actors in fractured Arab states. In these countries, "armies" and "militias" no longer appear as two distinct poles of an imaginary security continuum. Armies continue to exist in fractured Arab states, but they tend to be influenced by armed groups' rules and practices because of incomplete integration, rather than showing the strength to push armed groups to successfully adapt to institutional rules and practices. This means the ontological diversity between "armies" and "militias" erodes, weakening the hybrid approach's effectiveness in explaining the current security landscape.

In this context, the paper introduces the concept of re-generated military forces in Yemen, stating that the regular army integrated a consistent number of armed groups and fighters in their ranks, undergoing a deep transformation. Regeneration does not refer here to "quality," but rather to the "outcome of an ongoing process" in which integration – although only formal and ineffective - affects Yemen's internal security balances adding, or developing in parallel, to hybridization. At the same time, the regular army continues to fight and "govern" alongside institutionalized militias. While Yemen's structural military collapse after 2011 paved the way for security hybridization, prolonged conflict has allowed re-generated military forces to take shape, also building territorial control on the ground and consolidating local governance experiences. In Yemen, the consolidation of hybridity has forged new security balances. The trajectory of Yemeni security players addressed here offers

analytical tools for new research aimed to study other fractured Arab states: most of all Syria and Libya, while Iraq differs. In fact, while Yemen, Syria and Libya have consistently integrated armed groups and fighters into their armies, Iraq's trajectory beyond hybridity has reached a new balance around a dual shape. Iraq's defence structure can be considered dual since the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the army, and the Hashd al-Shaabi (also known as Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF) *de facto* counterbalance one another. The PMF were legalized in 2016 and the Prime Minister released a decree ordering their formal integration into the national armed forces in 2019, even though they continue to be autonomous players in the country, also with regard to local security governance. The persistent crisis marking Yemen and other Arab fractured states sheds light on how hybridity is no longer the most appropriate model to make sense of these security landscapes.