

The Rise of Militant Non-State Actors in the Middle East: Consequences for the Statehood

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Abstract

In the great power rivalries, the state employs various tactics to enforce their agenda at the regional scale. It involves conducting the intelligence based operations, limited strikes or fostering partnerships with the non-state actors. However, by forming the alliance with the non-state actors, the great powers often neglect the statehood of the parent state which results in the empowering of non-state actors. In the contemporary global order, militant non-state actors have generated a lot of attention owing to their increasingly transnational objectives. However, these non-state actors have also managed to evade the label of terrorism by integrating into the state structure of their parent states. In certain cases, where the integration was not feasible, the militant non-state actors have developed their social base through the incentives of social services. Under such circumstances, the state's integrity is compromised which have led to the new debates of conceptualizing the role of militant non-state actors around the globe. This study would debate on these factors by limiting the focus in the Middle East and would highlight the sponsorship of foreign states in the rise of militant non-state actors.

Key Words: Militant Non-State Middle East, Statehood, Offensive Realism, Proxies

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Introduction:

The militant non-state actors (MNSAs) are largely categorized into three forms i.e. terrorist entities, insurgent groups and belligerents. The differentiation between these three entities is largely a troublesome task for certain reasons. Firstly, each of them operates in a direct conflictual manner against the state which provides the state a legitimate reason to crack down against these entities. Secondly, all of them operates by utilizing the violent means which include the attacks on state's assets (political, economic and military) and guerrilla tactics. Thirdly, since the militant non-state actors have the rebellious tendencies, they do not subscribe to the international law which results in the human rights abuses, massacring of the population, drug trafficking and human smuggling. Moreover, these MNSAs can easily be disguised within the civilian population which makes it difficult for the state to engage with them in a coherent manner. The inability of states to draw lines between the terrorism and insurgencies has consequentially led to the longevity and the lethality of the conflicts which give rise to the radicalization of the masses. Attached to this is the foreign sponsoring of the MNSAs which makes the home states further apprehensive of the activities of MNSAs.

In defining the aforementioned terms, there exist no clear definition. It is widely regarded that the terrorism is a strategy that is employed by the insurgents to meet a political end. This is to say that insurgency might or might not be an act of terrorism. To meet the specific requirements of insurgency, it is widely categorized as a civil unrest within the state in which the dissidents enjoy the popular support and utilize militaristic characteristics. (Gupta, 2014) The insurgent groups are not recognized as the subjects of international law and operates within the general law of their parent state. Conversely, belligerency is an armed struggle between two poles of power over a territory. To declare any group a belligerent entity, the essential conditions include the administration of a large territory, an organized army and the responsible leadership. (Benvenisti, 2008) However, many states feel reluctance in giving the status of a "belligerent" to any group as it would guarantee the legitimacy of that group by making it the subject of international law. The unwillingness of the states to label any group belligerent results in a reverse effect of "terrorism". The prominence example is the case study of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The group has the control over the large border regions of Iraq and Syria, having their own governors and

established army yet it was categorized as a terrorist outfit. The reason which justifies it as the terrorist group is its indiscriminate killing of the general public. Initially, ISIS gained the massive support from the Sunni tribal elders in Iraq to confront the “Shi’ite monopolization” of Iraq. (Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, 2017) However, ISIS quickly turned their course against Sunnis along with Shi’ites, Yazidis and Kurds. This led to the diminishing popular base of ISIS within the Sunni territories and transformed it from an insurgency to a terrorist group. (Harvey, 2014) Secondly, ISIS-affiliated individuals and groups conducted their attacks beyond the territorial limits of Iraq and Syria over a general population of Europe and America. These coordinated attacks reduced the prospects of political change and turned ISIS into an organization which operates on the lines of creating fear and havoc beyond the immediate victims. Such actions of ISIS have termed the group as a proponent of terrorism.

However, there is an informal consensus among the states over the utilization of MNSAs which keep their focus towards a single political objective and avoid attacking in the non-combat zones. Such MNSAs are the vital tools for the states in expanding their influence across the territories and to implement their policies in a coercive manner. Engaging with MNSAs in a collaborative partnership is further reasonable for the states to avoid the cost of directly intervening into any conflict. In a direct confrontation, the outbreak of total war entails the repercussions for the states. As the great power rivalries are gaining prominence in the global structure, the significance of MNSAs is further highlighted. Although the sponsorship of MNSAs is not a new phenomenon yet the drastic changes in the relationship between the states and MNSAs have given the strength and space to MNSAs to assert their weigh in the global order. Thus, it is vital to analyse those factors which have made these MNSAs a viable option without the labelling of “terrorist notion” in a broader manner.

Literature Review

In a working paper, published by Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, MNSAs have been discussed in detail. (Call, 2015) It was argued that MNSAs possess large variety of heterogeneity and that their success depends upon three factors; extent of their control over the territory, their motivation and resource and their perception within the larger society. The paper also discussed two vital factors in the emergence of MNSAs i.e. state centrism of international law that essentially excludes the sub-state groups and the failure of state’s security apparatus which

results in the formation of militias to take up the responsibility of security. In both the cases, the fragility of peace and intensification in chaos are the consequential factors.

In the book, *Non-State Actors in Conflicts*, the author outlined the transformation in the concept of non-state actors. (Hawks, 2018) Previously, NSAs were regarded as entities or organizations linked with economic development, environmental issues and social sector. However, now the armed non-state actors have increasingly dominated the sub-state sphere. Furthermore, non-state actors are often associated with foreign powers who have vital interests in the host state, hence, their demonization by states also yields the trust deficit. Lastly, international politics are now only influenced by state actors now, instead MNSAs are now greatly influencing the international and mainly regional politics.

In another article, Darwich articulated the foreign policy of MNSAs. (Darwich, 2021) He argued that the rise of MNSAs resulted in the wake of proxy warfare, civil war and international interventions and therefore, MNSAs largely operate independently. MNSAs either act within the state, parallel to state or as a quasi-state, however, what is similar in all three scenarios is their monopoly over violence and 'rebel diplomacy' i.e. engaging with foreign powers. Hence, due to their operational tactics both militarily and diplomatically, they impact the foreign policy of their host state.

Through the aforementioned intellectual inputs, two aspects are deemed necessary to explore; one is the prospect of MNSAs to be integrated into the political spectrum of the host state while second is their role as proxies of foreign states that complement the latter's power, specifically with regards to the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

The study would evaluate the problem statement through utilizing the tenets of Offensive Realism which was put forward by John Mearshiemer in his book "Tragedy of Great Power Politics." He argues that the great powers are always "power maximizers" because of the anarchic world system which provides incentives for the great powers. By maximizing their power, great powers tend to become the hegemon of the system at the cost of their rivals. He further argues that those states who acquire the hegemony tend to preserve it and thus, the pursuit of power never ends. (Mearsheimer, 2001) By this expansionist nature, the elements of power politics come into effect

especially the “proxy warfare” and “asymmetric warfare”. In this context, the role of militant non-state actors would be analysed by analysing the contemporary global proceedings of emerging multipolarity and hegemonic competition which subscribes to the argument of Mearsheimer. In order to expand, the states utilize their power through proxies as the depiction of power politics. In the context of the Middle East, regional powers are indirectly engaging with each other through the proxy warfare and hence, the role of militant non-state actors prevails. It also compliments the buck-passing concept in which the great power or hegemon transfers the burden to its allies to keep the status quo intact.

Another theoretical concept through which the role of MNSAs could be understood is the Non-Traditional Security Framework which is profoundly popularized by Copenhagen School of Thought. While expanding the concept, it totally disregards the security as being limited to external threats only i.e. state vs state competition. Instead it coins two terms – ‘referent object’: to which the security issue matters i.e. the state and ‘securitizing agents’: those entities that take any issue as a security threat i.e. policymakers or general public. Therefore any issue which attracts the attention of securitizing agents can be termed as a security concern. (PS, 2020) Furthermore, any development – not necessarily the war against any state – can be termed as a securitizing issue if it fulfils the criteria of existential threat, need for an emergency response and impacts the interunit relations. (Floyd, 2011) Hence, given the nature of this NTS, MNSAs will also be analysed through this aspect as it poses the threat to statehood in the Middle East.

Rising Power of Militant Non-State Actors

Militant Non-State Actors are not the recent phenomenon in the international politics. The utilization of militant non-state actors has been present since the Medieval Ages. At that time, the mercenary groups would provide their services to the empire or kingdom in return for ransom and power. (Lower, 2017) With the rise of nation-state system, the mercenaries had been replaced by the national army based upon nationalist fervour and ideological coherence. This had allowed the states to form large armies to defend their territories and to attack the enemy with both efficiency and discipline. However, the revival of mercenary groups occurred with the advent of Nuclear Age. The nuclear threat prevented the states to go directly into the war with each other. The smaller states adopted the policy of bandwagoning with any great power (mainly nuclear power) to secure themselves from any external threat. However, as the great powers rivalry was revised, the focus

remained on upholding the “nuclear threshold”. This gave rise to the proxy conflicts between the super powers. Both the US and USSR adopted the strategy of financing different guerrilla groups against each other across Latin America, Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, the converging feature which remained pertinent since the medieval ages is the functioning of militant non-state actors under the umbrella of states (or empires). This is to say that the state-agency relationship remained consolidated where the agency (militant non-state actors) always remained dependent upon the support of the states which added to the sovereignty of states in nation-state system. Although the regime collapse continued to occur yet the state, as a unified territorial entity, continued to prevail.

However, in recent years, the state-agency relationship has been revised in a manner that it has given an unprecedented rise to MNSAs in terms of power and resources that the authority of the states has been challenged. The Middle East is the classic example where the inter-state rivalries have transformed into a proxy warfare, leading to the upsurge of MNSAs. The MNSAs have now grown into separate entities which largely operate autonomous of the states themselves. In a more spectacular manner, the MNSAs have now taken the de-facto control of certain states. To analyse these developments, the case studies of two MNSAs are under examination i.e. Hezbollah, Hashd Al-Shaabi and Ahrar Al-Sham. These three entities present the different scenarios and success ratio from each other yet the common feature is their ability to challenge the writ of the state. Furthermore, these three MNSAs either have been able to or are on their way to integrate themselves within the state structure without invoking the internal instability. Another motive of studying these MNSAs is their role in reshaping the great and medium powers rivalry in which there is a transformation from states’ centrism to a more complex order which involves both state and non-state entities.

Hezbollah

Hezbollah, or The Army of God, came into being during the Lebanese Civil War in 1985. (Norton, 2007) The group was formed with the assistance of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and has been the most loyal proxy of Iran since then. Hezbollah shares the strong adherence to the Iranian Wilayat e Faqih system and emulates Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as its spiritual leader. The group receives arms, ammunitions, missiles and funds from the IRGC which also trains its fighters. (DeVore, 2012) Iran- Hezbollah relations present the most

consolidated case study of state-agency partnership. Nevertheless, the strength of Hezbollah lies not only on Iranian support but also on its popularity among the Lebanese masses for two reasons. First, Hezbollah was formed from the base of Shi'ite strongholds in Southern Lebanon. The aim was to thwart the Israeli aggression and to reclaim the territory in order to elevate the impoverished Shi'ite masses. Hezbollah has been largely successful in liberating the Southern Lebanon from the Israeli occupation and since then, has established the vast network of social sector including schools, hospitals, small factories and real estate projects. (Byman, 2003) Along with this, Hezbollah also has its own satellite channel by the name Al-Manar, which regularly broadcasts the speeches of Iranian Supreme Leader and works as a media tool to promote the Iranian regional policies. This media outlet also reverences the Hezbollah fighters who have been killed in the battle field as the sources of igniting the essence of martyrdom and the continuing the revolutionary zeal. Second, apart from the sectarian outlet, Hezbollah emerged out to be the national entity encompassing every sphere of Lebanese social, religious and political groupings through its steadfastness against the war against Israel in 2006. In the 33 day war, Hezbollah emerged out to be victorious against Israel despite not being a state. (Kalb, 2007) Hezbollah's victory against Israel must be seen in the context of Israel's previous triumphs against the nexus of Arab states in 1948, 1967 and 1973. Hence, this provided a significant boost to Hezbollah's popularity within Lebanon and paved the way for its mainstreaming in political spectrum of the country and subsequently formulating the 'March 08 Alliance' in the Lebanese political fulcrum.

By becoming the part of the government, Hezbollah has strengthened its grip over the state's resources. It has provided the group with much flexibility in its conduct which has transformed it into an inexorable force within Lebanon. This has also contributed towards generating the indigenous funding for Hezbollah as well. Hezbollah holds shares in various Lebanese banks and exchange companies through which it conducts trade of merchandise goods and earn commissions. (Badran & Ottolenghi, 2020) Moreover, through the utilization of its leverage over the Lebanese politics, Hezbollah has upgraded itself from being a domestic force to a transnational militant actor. The chief example is the deployment of its fighters inside Syria to support the government of Bashar Al-Assad. (Sullivan, 2014) Supporting Al-Assad serves four major purposes for Hezbollah. Firstly, the Hezbollah's involvement in Syrian Conflict is widely hailed in the Hezbollah's strongholds of Shi'ite districts. The residents see Hezbollah's involvement as the inevitable step

in order to safeguard the Shi'ite holy shrines in Damascus. Secondly, it provides Hezbollah with the advanced weapon's training through close coordination with Iran. The war experience is essential for Hezbollah fighters in developing into a professional fighting force, the strength of whom could deter the enemy. Thirdly, by announcing its presence in Syria, Hezbollah has taken the strategic advantage over Israel. This has given Hezbollah the strategic space to counterbalance Israel's tactics and to shrink the breathing margin for Israel. Lastly, by becoming a transnational militant group, Hezbollah has been aiming to expand its foreign relations with other likeminded states and non-state actors. Such a step is a definitive tool to exert pressure in the domestic political and security structure of Lebanon. It is already speculated that Hezbollah's strength is much greater than the Lebanese National Army mainly due to its stockpiles of missiles and unconventional military tactics. Hence, in devising the security policy of Lebanon, the role of Hezbollah can't be neglected. Similarly, in the political arena, Hezbollah's presence would be influential in devising the foreign policy of the Lebanon.

Hashd Al-Shaabi

Hashd Al-Shaabi, commonly known as Popular Mobilization Force, is the security umbrella under which various Iraqi militias operate. The group was formed in 2014 in the wake of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's decree which made the defence of Iraq against the rising threat of ISIS, obligatory upon every Iraqi citizens. (Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, 2017) Since then, PMF has proved to be an effective force in combating ISIS and other terrorist outfits. The formation of group was assisted by Iran which is the primary sponsor of group's training, arms supply and funding. The group operates closely with the Iranian Quds Force – the external wing of IRGC. (Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, 2017) PMF showed high efficiency and success rate in fighting the ISIS as compared to the Iraqi National Army who was raised with the help of US. Despite being the main recipient of US aid in funding, logistics and training, Iraqi National Army couldn't stand against the growing clout of ISIS during the group's advance towards the major urban centre like Mosul. On the contrary, PMF not only managed to halt ISIS advance but through its guerrilla tactics, accomplished the task of defeating ISIS. Given its strategic significance, the force was integrated into the security apparatus of Iraq by the then Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider Al-Abadi, in 2017. (Paktian, 2019) The move had given legitimacy to the force and was hailed as the "saviour of Iraq" in a countrywide celebrations. Subsequently, in 2018, PMF came forward to contest in the Iraqi Parliamentary Elections and emerged out to be the 2nd largest party with 48

votes. Through aligning itself with the Iran backed Noori Al-Maliki's party and creating divisions within the Iraqi Sunnis MPs, the government formation was largely seen as favourable to PMF. (Numan, 2019)

Apart from the political and military aspects, the PMF engages itself actively in the social services and economic sectors of the country. In the liberated areas, PMF groups are reportedly imposing the travel taxes through establishing the security points. On a macro-level, PMF has been participating in the real estate projects of the country and pressing its presence in the energy sector as well. (Al-Nadavi, 2019) Apart from consolidating their control over the state's macroeconomic sectors, the PMF forces have been actively present in the newly liberated areas to ensure the consistent supply of humanitarian aid. Due to the lack of government's spending, the local PMF militias have been setting up the provisional clinics and field hospitals apart from supplying the routine food. (Gotts, *Alternative Governance: Non-state Armed Groups and the Iraqi Reconstruction Process*, 2018) The popularity of PMF arose significantly due to the presence of many Sunnis fighters and militias under its banner. For example, Imam Ali Brigades and Ali Akbar Brigades, which were established after the Sistani's decree, consisted of large portions of Sunni fighters. Similarly, the Sunni tribal force called Al-Hashd Al-Shariya which constitutes around 5000 active members, and Saladin Brigade under Yazan Al-Jabouri, are also the part of PMF. Such examples depicts the strong social base of PMF which makes it the force to be reckoned with inside Iraq. (Rudolf, 2020)

The strong domestic base of PMF and its hard stance against ISIS have allowed it to expand its operations beyond the Iraqi territories. Due to the common threat of ISIS, the PMF of Iraq has sent its fighters in Syria. The Iraqi fighters have been operating in close contact with other like-minded militias like Liwa Fatimiyoan (Afghani Fighters) and Liwa Zainabyoon (Pakistani Fighters). (Rezaei, 2019) However, the presence of PMF fighters have also strengthened the Assad regime against the rebel forces. In their conduct, the PMF fighters are operating on the guidelines of IRGC and under Hezbollah in Syria. (Smyth, 2019) In fact, the PMF militia "Hezbollah Brigades" is seen as the "Hezbollah of Iraq" that shares the similar vision and spiritual bond to the Hezbollah of Lebanon. The commander of Hezbollah Brigades, Abdul Mahdi Al-Muhandis, had been declared 'terrorist' by US Department of State in 2009. In January 2020, he was assassinated along with the

Iranian Quds Force Commander, Qassem Soleimani, in a drone strike by the US near the Baghdad Airport. (Beaumont, 2020)

The political success, legitimacy and the increased military power in the wake of fight against ISIS, have enabled PMF to formulate its own strategy for Iraq i.e. the opposition of the US troops inside the country. Its stance is reflected by the assertiveness which was signified by the attack on US embassy in Iraq in December 2019. Furthermore, the PMF has repeatedly fired the rockets over the US assets in Iraq which have led to the casualties of US troops and contractors. The successive governmental transitions in Iraq have made the country political unstable. The instability and the weakening of the government is further evident due to the presence of rival blocs in the Iraqi parliament and the non-political background of Iraqi Premiers, Adel Abdul Mehdi (2018) and Mustafa Al-Kadhimi (2020) – the latter one of the two is a technocrat and possesses the vast experience in the security and intelligence apparatus of Iraq. (Al-Kli, 2020) Due to his security background, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has previously worked closely with his US counterparts. Al-Kadhimi is also a proponent of the US military presence in the country and desired for a more strategic and collaborative ties with the US during an interview. His pro-US stance is further translated with his crackdown on PMF forces in 2020. Nevertheless, this has created the gulf between the government and PMF forces, leading to the escalation in attacks against the US. Subsequently, the Iraqi government had to release the detained PMF fighters. It is notable that PMF has been operating in contrast with the Iraqi state despite receiving the funds and payments of its fighters from the Iraqi government. Moreover, due to their ideological inclination towards Iran, the force is seen more loyal to Iran than that of Iraq itself and has grown into a substantial force that has spread its influence in political, economic, military and to an extent, regional sphere.

Ahrar Al-Sham

Ahrar Al-Sham, or commonly known as the Free Man Army of the Levant, is a Syrian based militant opposition group which aims to overthrow the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. The group was formed in 2011 by the prisoners freed by Assad regime and since then, it has generated a lot of attention. The group is based on the Sunni Salafist ideals and represents the most powerful militant opposition group in Syrian Civil War. The authority of the group was further consolidated in 2013 when it made an inclusive attempt of uniting the Syrian Islamist forces under the umbrella organization of 'Islamic Front'. The formation of IF multiplied the effectiveness of the group and

Syrian Army had to face the irrevocable resistance. It is evident through two major offensives by Ahrar Al-Sham upon the government's held territories. The first offensive was conducted in the city of Raqqa which drove out the government's forces in 2013 while the second major offensive was directed towards Idlib governorate in 2015 in a successful attempt of seizing that territory. (University, 2017)

Initially, the group has collaborated with both ISIS and the Al-Qaeda faction in Syria i.e. Al-Nusra Front which renamed itself to Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) in 2017. The three groups launched a joint offensive against the Alawites' villages in Latakia province in 2013. However, the relations with ISIS went sour after the leadership of Ahrar Al-Sham was killed in an attack coordinated by ISIS in 2014. Since then, Ahrar Al-Sham has worked closely with Al-Nusra Front to launch attacks against ISIS. (Haid, *The Symbolic War of Fatwas among Rebels in Syria and Its Implications*, 2016) For example, both the groups collaborated in the attacks against ISIS in 2014 in Raqqa governorate which nevertheless, remained unsuccessful in a longer run. Apart from the militancy, Ahrar Al-Sham had also engaged in a subsequent ceasefire with the Syrian government in 2015 of 48 hours and six months respectively. The group had also shown its intent of peace talks with Assad Regime in 2016 in a joint declaration with its allies. (Syrian Conflict: Ceasefire agreed, backed by Russia and Turkey, 2016) Furthermore, the group also sought the assistance of the US in its opposition to Bashar Al-Assad in 2015 by presenting itself as the most powerful opposition group in the country. (Steinburg, *Ahrar al-Sham - the Syrian Taliban: Al-Nusra ally seeks partnership with West*, 2016) By forming the umbrella organization of Jaysh Al-Fatah, the group managed to drive the Syrian forces out of Idlib in 2015. The victorious campaign provoked Saudi Arabia and Turkey to support the group due to their policy of overthrowing of Bashar Al-Assad. (Wilgenburg, 2015)

Ahrar Al-Sham represents the local Salafist groups and Idlib's Sunni population while rebuffing any transnational motive like that of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. The group has kept its focus towards insurgency inside Syria, primarily in Idlib, Raqqa, Aleppo, Hama and Latakia, while avoiding the label of "terrorism". (Al-Rawi, 2014) Unlike its counterparts like Al-Nusra Front and ISIS, the group has not been designated a terrorist entity by either US, UN or EU. The group is also critical of Al-Nusra ties with Al-Qaeda and has intervened in Idlib to stop the massacre of Druze villagers. Likewise, Ahrar Al-Sham is also involved in providing social services in the areas under its control

which include primarily the water and food supplies. Another factor which lays emphasis on insurgent nature of Ahrar Al-Sham is its close ties with Turkey who is the regular sponsor of the group. In 2018, Ahrar Al-Sham was included in the umbrella organization of “United Liberation Front” which was formed by Turkey as an attempt of uniting the rebel forces inside Syria. The organization shares ties with the Free Syrian Army which had been the recipient of US aid. (Yuksel, 2019) Apart from that, Ahrar Al-Sham also generates its own funding through the broder crossings into Turkey and supplies of weapon to other smaller militant groups. (Jonsson, 2016) However, Ahrar Al-Sham was left weakened due to the rise and subsequent control of HTS, who propagates the jihadist ideology, in the large portions of Idlib province. Still, it is significant that Ahrar Al-Sham provides the alternative of Islamist ideology which operates in a relative moderate manner. Furthermore, the state sponsorship has allowed Ahrar to interact with the international community. This is further evident from the group’s op-ed in Washington Post. (Al-Nahhas, 2015) Nevertheless, unlike the other two groups under study – Hezbollah and Hashd Al-Shaabi – Ahrar remained significantly short of achieving its objectives i.e. incepting Islamist system in Syria and the overthrow of Assad. Moreover, due to the presence of Jihadist factions, the group has also faced challenges in amalgamating its objectives with the vibrant practical tactics.

Diminishing Status of Statehood

In the Middle East, the MNSAs are posing an existential threat to the statehood in variety of manners. First, the powerful regional and global states are focusing more on building up their alliance with MNSAs instead of consolidating their partnerships with the parent states. In Lebanon, Iran has fostered the unhindered partnership with Hezbollah and their mutual alliance has overshadowed the significance of Lebanon as a state. Hezbollah has also enabled itself in forming a limited partnership with Russia in Syria where the Russian air force provides the protection to the Hezbollah forces on ground. In a contrast manner, in a statement by the Israeli official that Israel would no longer differentiate between Hezbollah and Lebanon since Hezbollah effectively controls the affairs of the country, also threatened Lebanon as a political entity. In case of Iraq, forming alliance with PMF has granted China the leverage over getting the oil projects in the country. Due to its strategic partnership with Iran, China has the opportunity to assert its influence in Iraq through its economic incentives. One such attempt has already been carried out in 2019 which is hailed across the PMF militias inside Iraq while generating criticism from the other factions of Iraqi statehood. Similarly, the leverage of Turkey over the Ahrar Al-Sham fighters

gives it the strategic space in expanding its influence in the region. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which was erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020, Turkey was accused of transferring the Syrian rebel fighters in the Caucasus to assist Azerbaijan. (Butler, 2020) In a similar manner, regional states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey along with the great powers like US and European States, mainly France, have focused their attentions on the rebellious factions instead of concluding the negotiations with the Syrian State.

The aforementioned MNSAs have utilized two major tactics in overshadowing their parent states role vis-à-vis their impact on the national and regional proceedings. In the context of Hezbollah and PMF, both these MNSAs have gradually integrated themselves into the political structure of their parent states which has provided them a political base and power. Instead of directly confronting the parent states, both these MNSAs have concluded the complimentary relationship with their respective parent states. However, the partnership between the state and agency has proved detrimental for the states owing to the foreign sponsoring of MNSAs. Second is the weakening of parent states in the wake of regional chaos and amidst great power rivalries. On the other hand, the over-expansion of MNSAs in the regional conflicts due to their wider prospects and utilization have prioritised MNSAs over their parent states. Ahrar Al-Sham, on the other hand, lacks political legitimacy. Although it is a significant challenge to Assad regime yet its exclusion from the political process have pushed it to the back foot. The reason of its exclusion from the political process in its unacceptance to participate into peace process negotiations. Furthermore, the presence of powerful jihadists also lessens the prospects of vitality for Ahrar Al-Sham. Nevertheless, its transnational activities in the wake of Turkey's role in Caucasus would eventually boost its war capabilities that could further put stress on the state structure of Syria especially in the wake of Idlib crisis.

Conclusion

Militant Non-State Actors have evolved into a powerful force which requires the proper dealing mechanism. In this attempt, the proxy warfare has only resulted in the persistence of conflicts while damaging the states' structure and exploiting the grievances of the dissidents. Additionally, MNSAs have been developing rapidly in becoming an autonomous organization which would defy the territorial boundaries. For now, the utilization of MNSAs is beneficial for the great powers but in a longer run, such state-agency relationship could face the challenges in the wake of over-

empowerment of MNSAs that they seem it unnecessary to follow the guidelines of their sponsoring states. From the history, it is evident in the case of Libya and Afghanistan that the trained armed groups adopted the divergent strategies once their prime objectives were achieved. Similarly, the over sizeable magnitude of MNSAs across the entire Middle East is reflecting the fault-lines within the region in terms of nationhood. As of now, MNSAs are a threat to their parent state only but as mentioned earlier, the sponsoring states would eventually feel the brunt if the state-agency relations tilt in favour of the agency. It is already evident in the case of Houthis who have now empowered themselves that their actions are threatening the interests of Iran i.e. their attacks on UAE in January 2022. Similarly, in the past, the sponsorship of Sunni jihadists in Iraq by the Gulf States resulted in the formation of ISIS which in turn, became a threat to the entire Gulf region. The transnational nature of the aforementioned MNSAs presents another crucial dynamic for the statehood in the Middle East. Unlike states who are bound by international law, MNSAs do not restrict themselves to the proceedings of global structure of their time because international law doesn't them the political entities. Therefore, to expand their power and influence, in terms of both human resource and financial means, MNSAs defy the territorial boundaries of states as evident from the case studies of Hezbollah and PMF. Hence, this recent phenomenon of the greater utilization of MNSAs must be further explored. What is essential is the integration of MNSAs into the international law and that can be done only after their greater assimilation into the structure of their parent state. However, their exploitation as a strategy of forward defence, as discussed in the case study of the Middle East, should be redefined as the power these MNSAs would generate, the lesser becomes the ability of these states to manoeuvre them as part of their foreign policy tools.

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