

The (Military) Rise of Armed Non-State Actors: Explanations and Implications

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Introduction

This policy brief seeks to understand the sources of strength of armed non-state actors and to explain why stronger state actors have sustained difficulties in defeating them on the tactical, operational and strategic levels. The brief is divided into four sections. First, it demonstrates a historical change in battle/conflict outcomes involving armed state actors (represented by incumbent governments or regimes) and armed non-state actors (represented by rebels or insurgents). Second, it gives an overview of the main explanations in the Security and Strategic Studies scholarly literature explaining that historical change in outcomes. The third part reviews the strategy(ies) of selected state actors in dealing with the military rise of armed non-state actors. The final section of the brief provides concluding observations.

The Rise of the Weaker Side(s)

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a steady rise in the capacities of insurgents. Mack (1975), Arreguin-Toft (2001), Lyall and Wilson (2009), Connale and Libicki (2010), Jones and Johnston (2013), Schutte (2014), and other scholars have shown a significant rise in the proportion of victories won by insurgents over stronger incumbents and in the inability of incumbents to defeat much weaker insurgents. This is a change in historical patterns. Lyall and Wilson (2009) showed using a dataset of 286 insurgencies between 1800 and 2005 that the incumbents won victories in only 25% of them between 1976 and 2005. This is compared to 90% incumbent victories between 1826 and 1850. Connable and Libicki (2008) produced a similar finding while studying 89 insurgencies. In 28 cases (31%), the incumbent forces won and in 26 cases (29%), the insurgent forces won. The outcome was mixed in 19 cases (21%) (Connable and Libicki 2008, 5).¹ Other scholars have discovered similar outcomes and, overall, regardless of the dataset employed and the timeframe selected, the findings have been consistent. Armed non-state actors have been altering a historical trend: that state actors monopolize the means of violence and therefore are more capable of defeating non-state actors on the battlefield. The trend applies to very different types of armed non-state actors from the FARC in Colombia to the Taliban in Afghanistan and beyond.

Competing and Complementary Explanations

The Security, Military and Strategic Studies literature provides a wide range of explanations to why weaker insurgents might beat or survive a stronger state force. These explanations primarily focus on geography, population, external support, military tactics and military strategy. Mao ([1938] 1967) highlighted the centrality of population loyalty for a successful insurgent by stating that an insurgent

“must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea.” The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual concludes that insurgencies represent a “contest for the loyalty” of a mostly uncommitted general public that could side with either the status-quo or non-status-quo, and that success requires persuading this uncommitted public to side with the status-quo by “winning their hearts and minds” (Petraeus et al. 2007, 79-136). Thompson (1966), Mason and Krane (1989), Wood (2003), Kalyvas (2006), Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), Braithwaite and Johnson (2012), and Condra and Shapiro (2012) show that the brutality of the incumbents against local population affects their loyalty, and therefore helps the insurgents in terms of recruitment, resources and legitimacy. General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, refers to this effect as the “insurgent math”: for every innocent local the incumbents’ forces kill, they create ten new insurgents (Deyfuss 2013). Kilcullen (2009) earlier coined the term “accidental guerrilla,” a reference to the consequences of indiscriminate repression leading elements of the local population to be drawn into fighting the incumbents, without being a priori enemies of them. There are also alternative arguments, showing that the brutal use of (state) violence against civilians may help the incumbents to defeat insurgents by alienating the locals.

Geography-centric explanations have also been proffered by the literature. Fearon and Laitin (2003) stressed that rough terrain is one of four critical variables supportive of an insurgency.² Mao ([1938] 1967, 7) argued that guerrilla warfare is most feasible when employed in large countries where the incumbents’ forces tend to overstretch their lines of supply. Macaulay (1978) and Guevara (1961) explained how tiny numbers of armed revolutionaries in Cuba manipulated the topography to outmaneuver much stronger forces and gradually move from

the easternmost province of the island towards the capital in the West. Galula (1964) was more deterministic when it came to geographical explanations. In his seminal work *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, he stresses that “the role of geography...may be overriding in a revolutionary war. If the insurgent, with his initial weakness, cannot get any help from geography, he may well be condemned to failure before he starts” (Galula 1964, 26). Boulding (1962) introduced the concept of the “Loss of Strength Gradient” (LSG) to geographical explanations. Briefly, it means that the further the fight is from the centre, and the deeper it is into the periphery, the more likely it is that the incumbents’ forces will lose strength. Schutte (2014) builds on and modifies the concept to argue that it is accuracy, not necessarily strength, which gets lost as a function of distance. He introduces the “Loss of Accuracy Gradient” (LAG): incumbents’ long-range attacks are more indiscriminate and less accurate (in killing insurgents) than short-range ones. Hence, civilian alienation becomes a function of distance, as a result of inaccuracy and indiscriminate killings (Schutte 2014, 8).³

Other scholars highlighted the importance of foreign support. In their study of 89 insurgencies, Connable and Libicki (2010) argued that insurgencies that “benefitted from state sponsorship statistically won a 2:1 ratio out of decided cases [victory is clear for one side].” Once foreign assistance stops the success ratio of the insurgent side fell to 1:4 (Connable and Libicki 2010, 8-9). This is relevant only to clear-cut victories, not to mixed cases or enduring insurgencies.

Finally, scholars explained insurgent victory based on either their military tactics and/or their military strategy. In terms of tactics, Lyall and Wilson (2009) argue that modern combat machinery has undermined the incumbents’ ability to win over civilian population, form ties with the locals, and gather valuable



human intelligence. Jones and Johnston (2012), Kilcullen (2014), and Sieg (2014) argue that insurgent access to new technologies in arms, communications, intelligence information, transportation, infrastructure, and organizational/administrative capacities has allowed them to enhance their military tactics to levels reserved historically for state-affiliated armed actors. This significantly offsets the likelihood of being defeated by incumbents' forces. Strategically, Arreguín-Toft (2001) offers a complex model of strategic interactions between militarily weaker actors and their stronger opponents. His study concludes that weaker forces can overcome resource paucity by employing opposing strategies (direct versus indirect) against stronger ones. A guerrilla warfare strategy (an indirect strategy) is best suited against direct attack strategies by stronger actors including "blitzkriegs" (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 100, 122).⁴

Several elements of these explanations well-apply to organizations operating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including Daesh, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Ansarullah (Houthis) and many others. But certainly, the political environment in the Arab-majority Middle East has its own particularities. A combination of arms and religion/sects or arms and chauvinistic nationalism in most of the Arab-majority world has proved to be the most effective means to gain and remain in political power. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are secondary means and, in many Arab-majority countries, relegated to being cosmetic matters. Armed non-state actors can certainly endure and expand in a regional context where bullets keep proving that they are much more effective than ballots, where extreme forms of political violence are committed by state and non-state actors and then legitimated by religious institutions, and where the eradication of

the "other" is perceived as a more legitimate political strategy than compromises and reconciliation. This is not to suggest, in any way, that the region is inherently violent. However, the dominant socio-political ruling elites in the Arab World, with few exceptions, consistently choose to conduct politics via violent methods ranging from systematically torturing individuals to genocidal policies.

On Counter-Strategy(ies): An Overview

The United States and its allies have developed a strategy to primarily confront non-state armed actors that threaten its national and strategic security. Other states, including Russia and Iran have followed through with their own strategic modifications. An overview of some of the pillars of these strategies are outlined below.

The U.S. and the allies have employed air strikes, including unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAVs – commonly known as "drones"), in seeking to degrade and contain non-state actors which threaten the United States, such as the Islamic State (IS), al-Qaida and the Taliban. The UCAVs are more of a tactic, not a strategy. They intend to degrade, and not necessarily destroy (Cordesman 2014, 3-5). Building on that, a second element of the strategy was to arm and support local partners on the ground who would attack and, eventually, destroy IS and other hostile non-state actors (The White House 2014). This is based on the Obama administration's (as well as the UK government and other NATO allies') decisions that the United States must refrain from sending ground troops. Hence, the alternative is to build up the capacities of "local partners" (The White House 2014). The third pillar acknowledges that IS is a symptom, not a cause, of the broken politics in the region (The White House 2014; Lewis 2014, 4-5). Therefore, any long-term solution must reform the political environment that has consistently engendered violent radicalisation for more than four decades.

Certainly, defeating IS militarily would only temporarily mask the deep structural problems at the source of its emergence, just like the earlier defeat of the mother-organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), in 2007-2008, has done. Given widespread levels of repression and corruption and corresponding senses of frustration and alienation among Arab Sunnis, the emergence of a new expression of anger would be inevitable, perhaps one worse than IS (who is currently more extreme than al-Qaida). The outcome of this strategy is not necessarily ideal. It is more likely to be the containment of IS rather than its destruction on the short term. Certainly, a failure to significantly boost local partners and find political solutions in Iraq and Syria would de facto lock the United States and the NATO allies into a long-term conflict and a containment strategy (Lewis 2014, 28; Juneau 2015, 38-39).

The critics of this strategy and its ineffectiveness in defeating hostile non-state actors are numerous, however. Among the most well-known is Sir David Richards, the former British Chief of Defense Staff, who led the coalition forces in Southern Afghanistan against the Taliban between 2006 and 2008. Before the rise of IS, in 2010, Sir Richards warned that the war on al-Qaida network would fail, and that the elimination of “Islamist militancy” is “unnecessary” and “will not be achieved.” (Richards 2010; Rayment 2010).

Implications and Concluding Observations

The counterstrategy employed by the American-led coalition has had some positive impacts. Its airstrikes and air presence over Iraq and Syria have compelled IS to limit the usage of the conventional military tactics it used to use before mid-2014, and ultimately have led to their losing control of a significant amount of territory. Airstrikes also provided

limited space and some time for capacity-building efforts and, perhaps optimistically, for political solutions to be found.

In relation to the political dimension, it is critical to realize that armed non-state actors in the region are a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional politics in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and the Gulf. Hence, the military defeat of IS would not be enough. A sustained political reform and reconciliation process will be necessary eventually.

More generally, regarding the political environment, the Arab-majority uprisings have given scholars and practitioners several important lessons about how changes within the political environment can affect the rise and/or the transformation of armed radical groups. The rationale of violent extremists that political violence is the only significant method for socio-political change was briefly undermined by successful civil resistance campaigns that brought down two dictatorships in Tunisia (2010/2011) and Egypt (2011) and initiated democratic transition processes. But the brutal tactics of the Qaddafi and the Assad regimes in dealing with protestors showed the limits of civil resistance. These limits were also highlighted in Iraq (April 2013 crackdowns by al-Maliki government on Sunni-majority sit-ins) and in Egypt (during and in the aftermath of the July 2013 military coup).

In the context of partly-institutionalized democratic transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Yemen (especially between 2011 and 2013), a few critical policy-relevant observations can be deduced regarding the political environment and long-term strategic vision. First, former violent extremist organizations that have switched to non-violent political activism notably remained within the limits of their transformation between 2011 and 2013, when a fragile



democratization process was still ongoing. Groups such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), and factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organization established political parties, competed in elections, participated in constitutional assemblies, and made significant political compromises to bolster transitions away from authoritarianisms. For example, in 2011, the IG became a mainstream political party in Egypt that organized anti-sectarian violence rallies and issued joint statements for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic Church of Assyut (a southern city and an IG stronghold).

Another policy-relevant observation has to do with security sector reform (SSR). From previous research, de-radicalization and the transition from violent to non-violent activism is less likely to be sustained unless there is a thorough process of reforming the security sector (Ashour 2009; 2012). The reform process should entail changing the standard operation procedures, training and education curricula, leadership and promotion criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions. The violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been a major contributor to sparking and sustaining violent extremism. This goes way back; since Sayyid Qutb significantly altered his ideology after witnessing a massacre in former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's prisons in 1957 (Ashour 2009). Jihadism and Takfirism, in their purist forms, were both born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s where torture was an systematic practice endorsed by multiple and overlapping security establishment; not that different from today's Egypt. Ultraconservative and extremist ideologies such as Wahabbism were also born and developed under authoritarian systems. None of the aforementioned ideologies have come out of a consolidated or a mature democracy.

Related to SSR are the unbalanced civil-military relations in most of the Arab-majority countries (Ashour 2015; Sayigh 2013; Chitani, Ashour and Intini 2013). The supremacy of the armed institutions over all other state institutions has engendered a political environment in which state repression became the most important method for attaining and remaining in political power. Such a context in which state-sanctioned violence is legitimated in various forms (including official religious institutions and hyper-nationalist propaganda) is less likely to lead to democratization or sustained stability.

Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) are also critical processes which can engender or undermine political environments supportive of violent extremism. The politicization of these processes and their failures in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and Yemeni uprising have led to the rise of multiple armed non-state actors. This resulted in the facilitation of the necessary resources and logistics to organizations such as IS as well as al-Qaida affiliated groups. DDR is directly related to SSR. Most armed non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilize if there is no mutual trust or weak institutional arrangements to balance relations with the official security and military sectors. This is especially the case when these official sectors have been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. This is among the reasons for the failure of de-escalation in towns and regions including Derna in Eastern Libya to Sinai in North-Eastern Egypt, Central and Northern parts of Iraq, and Southern and South-Eastern and Northern parts of Yemen, where armed actors representing the authorities are deeply mistrusted due to historical violations and impunities. SSR and DDR failure can undermine any future political solution in



Syria and hence in the long-term empower various non-state actors.

A final observation is also critical: popular support for national reconciliation, compromises, inclusion and general de-escalation. This support is crucial for undermining violent extremism and the environments that engender and sustain it. Popular support for these processes is partly a result of a political culture that “can be created and promoted via elementary, secondary and higher education, as well as a result of a responsible free media that promotes such concepts, as opposed to a hysteric media that promotes social and sectarian polarization, which is currently the case in many of the Arab-majority states” (Ashour 2015d).



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Endnotes

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

3

helicopters in September 2015. The killings of Egyptian civilians due to LAG are common in Sinai, but much less publicized.

4-According to Arreguín-Toft, strong actors won 76 percent of all same-approach strategic interactions, while weak actors won 63 percent of all opposite-approach interactions (Arreguín-Toft 2001, 111).

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